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Publisher's Compliments.
A Novel.

BY

B. L. FARJEON.

AUTHOR OF

“BLADE-O'-GRASS,” “GRIF,” “TOILERS OF BABYLON,”

“THE MYSTERY OF M. FELIX,” ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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BASIL AND ANNETTE.

CHAPTER I.

IN the old world the reign of winter has commenced. The woods are snow-white, the hedges are frosted over, the pools are frozen, icicles hang from the branches of the trees. Wayfarers walk briskly, stamp their feet, and beat their hands to keep the circulation going; while other humans, whom business does not call from their houses, snuggle round the fireside, with doors and windows closed to keep out the nipping air. Winged immigrants that came in the sweet spring days have long since taken their departure to warmer climes, bearing with them memories of a bright youth, to be renewed when another spring smiles upon the land.

In the new world, at the same moment, it is nature's holiday time. The air is scented with the fragrance of white lilies and jessa-

mine ; fringed violets carpet the woods ; the wild passion fruit, with its gleaming scarlet flowers, illuminates the bushes ; the palm-tree rears its graceful head above festoons of feathery leaves, in which clumps of red berries shine like clusters of stars ; tall quandong-trees and wild plums shoot up straight as arrows, for the most part clear of vines and creepers, but not always successful in escaping the embrace of the stag's horn fern, one of the handsomest of all Australia's parasites ; and the white-wooded umbrella-tree proudly asserts its claim to pre-eminence, with its darkly lustrous laurel-shaped leaves surmounted by long radiating spikes of crimson flowers, the brilliancy of which rivals the glowing sunset of the South. Through the grand forests, in which for unnumbered ages the dusky savage has roamed in freedom, never dreaming of the invasion of a higher civilisation, flit flocks of resplendent parrots, chief among them being the blue mountain, the rosella, and the crimson wing ; black cockatoos, with their dazzling tails spread out, are lurking in the branches of the bloodwood trees, where they find both food and shelter ; flycatchers, all green and gold, are cunningly watching the waterholes

for prey ; laughing jackasses, with their blue feathers and cold grey eyes, which are now twinkling with fun, are making merry over the absurd antics of native companions, whose conceited hoppings and twirlings are comic enough to inspire mirth in the dullest denizens of the woods ; while the soft musical notes of the bell-birds, all green and purple, blue and golden, make harmonious the west wind which travels from the beeches, and fill the air with melody strange and sweet.

Within hail of these summer evidences of loveliness and grandeur stand two men, one young, the other not yet middle-aged. The younger man, whose name is Basil Whittingham, is the embodiment of careless, indolent grace, but just now he is evincing an unusual earnestness of manner, both in speaking and listening. His age is barely twenty-three, and he bears about him the unmistakable stamp of gentleman. This is not always the case with men who have honest claims to the title, but with some few it is a gift. It is so with Basil Whittingham. He has blue eyes, fair hair, a supple, graceful form, a laughing mouth, with teeth like pearl, delicate hands, and a long light-brown moustache, which he evi-

dently regards as a magnificent possession, and cherishes and nurses as a thing of beauty. Otherwise he has not much to be proud of in the shape of possessions, for his clothes would be anything but presentable in Mayfair, though here in the Australian woods they may serve well enough. His trousers, tucked into old knee boots, have conspicuously seen their best days ; his shirt, of some light material, has rents in it, showing the fair skin of his arms embrowned by the sun where the sun could get at them ; the sash round his waist is frayed and faded ; his wide-awake hat, sound in front, is tattered at the back, where it flaps loosely over his flowing hair ; and, moreover, he is smoking a short black cutty. Yet despite these drawbacks, if drawbacks they can be called in this land of freedom, freer indeed than any republic under the sun, even the most ordinary observer would be ready to acknowledge that the man was a gentleman. One, for instance, who would not do a dirty trick, who would not tell a lie to serve his own interests, who would not betray a friend, and who would be more likely to wrong himself than others. Tender, simple, brave ; fearless, but not foolhardy ; open-hearted, confiding,

and unsuspecting of sinister motives in those with whom he has once shaken hands ; with a sense of humour which lightens adversity ; regretting not the past, though he has wilfully steered his boat into the Bay of Poverty, and dreading not the future : such is Basil Whittingham, a typical type of an honest, frank, manly English gentleman.

His companion, by name Anthony Bidaud, was born and bred in Switzerland, but is of French extraction. He speaks English fluently, so well indeed that those who serve him will not believe he is a foreigner. He has not yet reached middle age, but he looks sixty at least, and on his worn, anxious face dwells the expression of a man who is waiting for a mortal stroke. He is well dressed, after the free bush fashion, and is no less a gentleman than Basil Whittingham. It is the mutual recognition of social equality that keeps Basil penniless and poorly clad, for he is a guest, not a dependent, on the plantation of which Anthony Bidaud is master. This state of things suits the careless nature of the younger gentleman, who, welcomed and received by Anthony Bidaud as an equal, takes a pride in holding himself free from the touch of

servitude. Perhaps Annette, of whom you shall presently hear, serves as a factor in the attitude he has chosen.

Being the hero of our story, it is needful that something should be related of his career in the home country.

His parents were Devonshire people, and he their only child. It was supposed that his father was a man of fortune ; he lived as one, kept hounds and horses, and maintained a costly establishment. Needless to say that Basil was the idol of his parents ; he was also the idol of a wealthy uncle, to whom he paid a visit once in every year, and who, being childless, had announced his intention of making Basil his heir. Thus, all seemed smooth and pleasant-sailing before the young fellow. But misfortunes came ; at the age of fourteen he lost his mother. The memory of the solemn moments he spent by her bedside before she closed her eyes upon the world abided ever with Basil, whose passionate adoration for the dear mother was a good testimony of his affectionate disposition. But there was something deeper than affection in the feelings he entertained for her. She had been to him more than a loving mother ; she

had been his truest counsellor and friend. Upon her had devolved the father's duty of inculcating in their child those strict principles of honour and right-doing which set the seal of true manhood upon him who follows them out in his course through life. Basil's father was of an easy, genial nature, and it was from him that Basil inherited a cheerfulness of temper and a sense of humour which lessened evils instead of magnifying them. The higher qualities of his character came from his mother. Lying on her death-bed she impressed upon him the beauty of honesty and uprightness, and the lad's heart responded to her teaching.

"Never look to consequences, my dear child," she said. "Do always what is right ; and when you are a man counsel and guide your dear father."

He promised to obey her, but it was not until many years had passed that he knew what she meant when she told him to counsel and guide his father. It was she who had steered her husband's boat when it had got into troubled waters, and steered it always into a safe harbour. No one knew it, no one suspected it ; not even her husband, who be-

lieved that it was due to himself alone that he escaped dangers which threatened him from time to time ; but this ignorance was due to her wisdom, and partly, also, to her love ; rather than wound his feelings, she preferred to suffer herself. It is not to be inferred from this remark that she had not led a happy life ; she had, and her home was happy in the truest sense ; but she sighed to think of her husband, left alone to grapple with difficulties which his easy nature prevented him from seeing.

She had a private fortune of her own, and with her husband's consent she made a will devising it all to her son, with the exception of some small legacies to humble friends. The money was to be invested, and to accumulate till Basil was twenty-one years of age, when he was to come into possession of it ; so that, even without his uncle, he was comfortably provided for. A short time after his mother's death his father announced his intention of giving up his establishment in the country and settling in London. The home in which he had passed so many happy years with his wife was desolate and sad now that she was gone from it ; he wandered through

the rooms with a weight on his heart which memory made heavier instead of lighter.

“Yes, Basil,” he said to his son, “it is the best thing I can do. If I remain here I shall lose my reason; I must find some distraction from grief.”

Basil was too young to question this decision; what his father resolved upon must be right. The old home was sold up, and father and son removed to London. Then came the question of Basil's education. His uncle considered removal to London a step in the wrong direction, and he wrote to that effect; he also expressed his opinion that London was an unsuitable place in which to conduct a young gentleman's education. “Give the lad a tutor,” he said, “and let him travel.” This was done, and before he was fifteen years of age Basil was living on the Continent, picking up knowledge and picking up pleasure in not quite equal quantities, the latter predominating. It was an agreeable life, and Basil did not harm by it. Every year he came to England, and spent a month with his father in London, and a week with his uncle in the country. On one occasion he and his uncle spent this week together

in the great city, living at Morley's Hotel, Charing Cross, and seeing the sights, and this visit was destined to be pregnant with strange results in years to come. Except upon all other occasions the uncle received Basil in the country. The old gentleman was full of quips and cranks and imaginary ills. He fancied himself an invalid, and coddled himself up absurdly ; and Basil, when he visited him, seldom left the house. The forced seclusion did not trouble the young fellow ; he could make himself happy anywhere. Certainly there were few dull moments in his uncle's house when Basil was in it, and the old gentleman, while not objecting to a display of animal spirits, improved the opportunity by endeavouring to drive into his nephew's head a special kind of worldly wisdom. As, for instance : All men are rogues (ourselves excepted). Never open your heart to a friend (except to an uncle who is going to leave you all his money). Keep your secrets. Spend your money on your own pleasures and your own ambitions. Never make yourself responsible for another man's debts. *Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera*. This kind of counsel was showered upon

Basil, and produced no effect upon him whatever ; he was spared the trouble of arguing upon these matters, even if he were in the humour for it—which he was not ; he had a knack of avoiding disagreeable topics by his uncle's everlasting assertion that the counsel he gave was absolutely indisputable, and was to be received as such.

“ All right, uncle,” said Basil ; “ now let us talk of something else.”

And he would fly off into accounts of such of his Continental adventures as he knew would please the old fellow. He had a capital gift of description, and the old man would sit huddled up in his arm-chair, cracking his sides at his nephew's wit. Basil never bade his uncle good-bye without a cheque for a substantial sum in his pocket. He was liberally provided for by his father, but he did not despise his uncle's gifts. Seeing that his stories of his travels amused his uncle, he said that he would one day write a book.

“ And when you write it,” his uncle said, “ burn it. Write a book indeed ! Put your time out at better interest, Basil. Make money, money, money. Then people will bow down to you. *I'm* not a nice object to

look at, am I? But I've got money, and people bow down to *me*! How much more will they be likely to do so to a handsome fellow like you? Make money, my boy, make money, and stick to it."

Which worldly advice went as usual in at one ear and out at the other. After all, the old gentleman's remarks had only a general application; had there been any special interest at stake Basil would have argued it stoutly enough, and thereby got himself into hot water.

So things went on till Basil was twenty-one years of age, when he was to come into possession of his mother's fortune. On his birthday he wrote to his father, saying he would be home in a fortnight, and full of kind messages—messages which did not reach the sense of the man for whom they were intended: on the day the letter was delivered at the London address his father was lying in delirium on a bed from which he was never to rise. A week before he intended to start for home Basil received a letter informing him of the sad news. "Come back immediately," the writer said, "if you wish to see your father alive." Basil did not lose a

moment. Travelling as quickly as possible he arrived at his father's house—too late. It was a terrible blow to him, more terrible than the loss of his mother, for which he had been in a measure prepared. Death came more slowly in her case, and she had instilled into her son a spirit of resignation which softened the bereavement. Even before she drew her last breath Basil had thought of her as an angel in heaven. But with his father it was so sudden; there had been no preparation for the parting, no indication of it. It was true that his father had been ailing for months, but he had been careful not to alarm his son. He may have believed, as most men do, that the worst would not happen; we are chary in applying to ourselves the rules we are so ready to apply to others. Only in his last hour of consciousness, before he fell into the delirium from which it was fated he should not recover, had he asked for his desk, and taking from it a sheet of paper wrote a few words to his son, which he desired should be delivered in the event of anything serious happening to him. He did not believe it even then; had he been a religious man he would have weighed the matter more

deeply, but he was one who, living as fairly good and moral a life as the average church-goer, seldom went to the Divine fount for comfort and counsel. It might have been better for Basil if he had, for a warning might have come to him to check the mad desire which had taken possession of him.

Between him and Basil there had never been a harsh word. Each bore for the other the truest affection. Never a cross, never an ill-tempered look; unvarying sweetness had marked their intercourse. So sudden a separation could have been nothing less than terrible to the living. It was long before Basil recovered from it. With the exception of his crotchety old uncle he was absolutely without kith or kin. Letters had passed between them with reference to the sad event. "I cannot come to London to attend the funeral," his uncle wrote; "I am too infirm and feeble. When you have settled your father's affairs I shall be glad to see you to talk things over. It is time you made a serious start in life. You have your mother's fortune, and your father's, which I should say is a handsome one; you will have mine, though I intend to keep you out of it as long as I can. You are

a lucky dog ; you ought to die a millionaire." A mortal ending the absolute desirability of which may well be doubted. Basil replied, hoping his uncle would live to a good old age, and promising to visit him as soon as affairs were settled. In his father's desk he found the scrawl which the dying man had written. It was very short.

"My dear Basil,—The honour of my name is in your hands. Your loving father."

He had not strength to attach his name.

It was not until the day after the funeral, that the significance of these words impressed itself on Basil. "The honour of my name is in your hands." They were his father's last words to him. What meaning did they bear? He had heard from his father's lawyers, informing him that they had the will in their possession, and that they were at his service. He wrote to them, to the effect that he would call upon them early the following morning.

The head of the firm received him gravely and courteously, and gave orders that they were not to be disturbed.

The will had been drawn out years since, and no alteration had been made in it. Every-

thing was left to Basil, unreservedly to him. There were affectionate allusions in it which drew tears from Basil's eyes. When his emotion had subsided he observed that the lawyer was regarding him with an air of curiosity.

"May I ask," said the lawyer, "if full confidence existed between you and your father?"

"The fullest," replied Basil. "He had no secrets from me, nor I any from him."

The lawyer seemed sensibly relieved. "You know of his speculations?"

"His speculations!" exclaimed Basil, in surprise. "I was not aware that he speculated."

"Then full confidence did not exist between you. I warned him; I could do no more than that. In my experience, my dear sir, I have seen so many go the same way. There is but one end to it, and this has ended as the others have done."

"I will listen to nothing against my father," said Basil warmly.

"I have nothing to say against him," responded the lawyer, "except that he was unwise. He had an intense craving to leave you a very large fortune, and this craving

became a kind of disease in him, and led him on. I regret to tell you that all his speculations have ended disastrously."

"That is to say, have resulted in a loss?"

"In great losses."

"To what extent?"

"Claims are pouring in. If they are satisfied, the will in your hands is not worth more than waste paper. But some of the claims may be contested, and in my belief successfully. But that will be a matter for counsel's opinion."

"It has nothing to do with counsel," said Basil; "it has to do with me. I am my dear father's representative, and it is for me to determine what is to be done."

"Undoubtedly. Instructions must come from you."

"Claims are pouring in you say. Can you tell me to what amount?"

"As far as we have received them; there are more to be presented you understand."

"Yes."

"Plainly, then," said the lawyer, "the property your father has left will not be sufficient to meet his debts."

"They must be paid, however."

The lawyer inclined his head.

“Yes,” said Basil, rising and pacing the room in his excitement, “they must be paid. No stigma must rest upon my father’s memory. Some of the claims may be contested, you say? In justice?”

“Legally,” replied the lawyer.

“I ask you again,” said Basil. “In justice?”

The lawyer, declining to commit himself, made no reply.

“At least,” said Basil, “you can answer me this question. My father owes the money?”

“Yes, my dear sir, he owes the money.”

“Then it must be paid. Do you not see that it *must* be paid? No man shall have the power of uttering one word against him.”

“But,” said the lawyer, eyeing the young man as he would have eyed a psychological puzzle, “if the estate left by your father is not sufficient to satisfy all these claims, what is to be done?”

“I have money of my own—my mother’s fortune—of which you have the particulars.”

“Yes, we can give you all the information you require, and it requires but your signature to a few documents, already prepared, my

dear sir, to place you in possession of this very handsome inheritance."

"You can probably tell me the amount of it."

"Almost to a farthing. It is invested in the safest securities, realisable at an hour's notice, and it amounts to"—the lawyer took some papers from a japanned box, and ran his eye over them—"it amounts to not less than twenty-three thousand pounds."

"Will that," asked Basil, "with my father's estate, satisfy in full the claims which are pouring in?"

"But my dear sir," expostulated the lawyer, with a look of astonishment—

Basil would not allow him to conclude, "I have to repeat some of my questions, it seems," he said. "Will this fortune, which is realisable in an hour, satisfy in full the claims of my father's creditors?"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders, and replied briefly, "More than satisfy them."

"Then the matter is settled," said Basil. "I empower you to collect the whole of these claims to the uttermost farthing; to convert the securities which are mine into money; to prepare a complete balance sheet, and to pay

my father's creditors in full, with as little delay as possible."

"I am to accept these instructions as definite and decisive?"

"As definite and decisive!"

"They shall be followed and carried out with as little delay as possible. I must trouble you to call here at three o'clock this afternoon to sign the necessary papers."

"I will be punctual. Good morning; and I am greatly obliged to you."

"Good morning, my dear sir," said the lawyer, adding under his breath, "and I am greatly astonished at you."

At three o'clock that afternoon Basil called again at the lawyer's office, and signed "the necessary papers," and went away with a light heart and a smiling face. Within a month the affair was concluded, his father's estate was realised, and his father's creditors were paid in full. There remained to him then, out of his mother's fortune, the sum of three thousand pounds.

He was perfectly happy and contented. Long before the business was finally settled he had realised what his father meant by his last few written words: "My dear Basil,—

The honour of my name is in your hands. Your loving father." To good hands indeed had the honour of a dead man's name been entrusted. Basil had preserved it unsullied, unblemished.

He took no credit for it ; he had fulfilled a sacred trust. It was simply a duty performed.

" Now," he said to himself, " I will go and see my uncle."

But while he was preparing to start he received a letter from that gentleman, which will explain why the visit was never paid.

"Nephew Basil" (the letter ran), " I have received news of your mad proceedings since your return home. No person in his sober senses would have acted as you have done. The greater portion of the claims made against your father's estate could have been legally and successfully contested, and even in what remained a sharp lawyer could have obtained a substantial abatement. This view, as I understand, was presented to you by an able firm of solicitors, but you rejected it, and chose to play the fool. Now, I do not care to have dealings with a fool.

"I might have pardoned you for sacrificing

your father's estate to satisfy these claims, but I will not pardon you for sacrificing the fortune your mother left you. It proves to me that it is not safe to entrust money to you, and I have decided to put mine to better use than to leave it to you. Accept this intimation as my ultimatum. It is the last letter you will ever receive from me, and you will never see me again. Therefore you need not go to the trouble of coming my way. My house is not open to you. All the good counsel I have given you has been thrown away. You might have told me at the time, and I should have saved my breath and my patience. Good-bye, foolish nephew.

“BARTHOLOMEW WHITTINGHAM.”

He was angry enough to add a postscript :

“As you are so fond of paying debts for which you are not responsible, what do you say to considering the money I have given you from time to time as one, and handing it back? You can do as you please about it. I can make no legal demand for it, but I gave it to you under the impression that you were not exactly an idiot. It amounts to quite

fourteen hundred pounds. If I had it I would put it out at good interest."

To state that Basil was not hurt by this letter would be to state what is not true. He had an affection for the old fellow, and he was greatly pained to think that all was over between them; but he was not in the least disturbed by the old man's arguments. He had done what was right; of this he was sure. But the letter stung Basil as well as hurt him. There was a bitter twang in his uncle's remark that he could make no legal demand for the money he had given his nephew. "He shall have it back," said Basil, "every farthing of it." Then he was seized with an expensive fit of humour. His uncle had spoken of interest. He would prove that he was not a whit less independent than the old fellow himself. He made some lame and ridiculous calculations of interest at five per cent. per annum, and arrived at the sum of two thousand pounds and a few pence. He got a draft for the amount, and inclosed it in the following note:—

"All right, my dear uncle. Here is your

money back again, with interest added. If it is not enough interest, let me know, and I will send you more. Good-bye, and good luck to you.

“Your affectionate nephew,

“BASIL.”

This last debt paid, Basil had barely a thousand pounds left. He did not hear from his uncle again.

Now, what was he to do? He was without profession or trade, and did not feel equal for any kind of service he saw around, even if it was offered to him. “I think,” he said, “I will travel a little more.” He did so, and was prudent enough to travel in an economic spirit; but his money went fast enough for all that. At the end of a year and a half he had in his purse exactly one hundred pounds. Was he dashed? Not a bit. But he knew that something must be done. “I will go to Australia,” he said. The project exalted him. He glowed, he rubbed his hands, he was in a whirl of pleasant excitement. He would be in a new land, in a land of adventure, in a land of romance. There he would be all right of course. Not a doubt of it. As for his empty

purse—and it *was* pretty well empty by the time he had paid for his passage and a few necessary odds and ends—he scarcely gave it a thought. Was he not going to Australia, the poor man's El Dorado? So he set forth in a sailing vessel, and enjoyed the passage immensely, and landed in Sydney as happy as a king. The fairy harbour, the most beautiful in all the wide world, enchanted him; the ravishing scenery enchanted him; the quaint old city, so home-like in its appearance, enchanted him. Certainly he had come to the right place.

He was rather more melancholy a few weeks afterwards, but he never lost heart. Suitable employment did not present itself so readily as he had thought it would, and gold was not to be picked up in the streets. “I am making a mistake,” he said. “I must not remain in the city; I must go into the bush.” He soon made a start, and began tramping Queensland way, and after some weeks of wandering reached the tract of country which Anthony Bidaud had taken up.

CHAPTER II.

ON the plantation which he had brought almost to perfection by twenty years of wise labour Anthony Bidaud lived with his only child, Annette, fourteen years of age. He had no other of his kindred near him. The wife he brought from Switzerland lay in a flower-covered grave within a mile of the spot upon which he stood. They came to the colony childless, but after a lapse of years Annette was born to them. Until the child was nine years of age the fond mother was spared to rear her, and then one morning Annette awoke to find the dear protector lost to her. It was an irreparable loss in that far-away land, and there was no one of her own sex to take the mother's place. But Annette had her father left, and he, not unsuccessfully, strove to fill the void in his child's life. He was unremitting in his tenderness and watchfulness, and he bestowed upon his little one a full-hearted love. The two had lived together till

now, when Anthony Bidaud's heart was gloomed by the fear of approaching death. He had never been strong, and the climate of the new world in which he had made his home was destined to be fatal to him. He made pilgrimages to Sydney and Melbourne to consult the best physicians, but they gave him little hope. Death was approaching surely and swiftly. A gnawing pain, an inexpressible grief, stirred his heart as he thought of his child, whom he idolised. The reflection that she would be left alone in this wild spot, in this remote part of the world, without a relative, with scarcely a friend, appalled him. Yet what could he do?

He had neither sought nor made friends, he and his wife and child had been sufficient for each other, and when his wife died he and Annette sighed for no other companionship. But had he sought friendships he would not have succeeded in making them in any but fitful fashion. His nearest neighbour was twenty miles away, and everybody in the colony was so intent upon "getting on" and making his fortune, that there was no time for social intercourse. In colonial cities there

was at that time but little "society;" in the bush, none.

About a hundred feet above the blue clear stream of the Pioneer stood the house in which Anthony Bidaud lived. The slabs with which it was built had been split from the gum and bloodwood trees growing in the forest which lay in the rear of the huts and buildings inhabited by the labourers, chiefly South Sea Islanders, who worked on the plantation. The roof was composed of shingles split from the same description of trees. The interior of the house was lined with rich, dark red cedar, which grew in the thick scrub on the opposite banks of the river. An avenue of bananas led from the house along the cliff to an arbour, in which oranges, custard apples, guavas, and other delicious fruits, ripened in unsurpassed perfection. The posts of the verandahs which surrounded three sides of the house were covered by gigantic passion fruit, except at one end, which was completely enclosed by grape vines and the yellow jessamine. Hammocks were slung in the verandahs, and the occupants could swing idly to and fro, shaded from the hot sun, and within reach of the fruit which grew in such wonderful abun-

dance and luxuriance all around. A lovely home for husband, wife, and children ; a dream which a poet soul only could properly appreciate, but for one simple human being, in whose days the flower of human affection was not blossoming—little better than a wilderness.

It was of this sad prospect, which his state of health warned him lay before Annette, that Anthony Bidaud was speaking to Basil at the time of their introduction to the reader. They had been acquainted but a short time, but each bore for the other a genuine esteem. Some kindred qualities of independence, high-mindedness, and honesty of purpose had drawn them together from the hour they first met, and would have drawn them even closer in the future ; but the shadows gathering over one life marred this fulfilment of a brighter promise. Barely two months had elapsed since Basil Whittingham, presenting himself to Anthony Bidaud, had asked for the shelter of his roof for a night. Annette was present when Basil appeared ; by her side a faithful Scotch terrier, who guarded his young mistress with watchful care, and when needed, with ferocity. Basil stooped and patted the

head of the dog, who did not snarl and show his teeth, as was his wont with strangers, but submitted to the familiarity with unusual amiability. The sensible creature went even farther than this; he rose, and rubbed his head against Basil's leg, courting by that action a continuance of the caressing.

"Father," said Annette, "no stranger has ever done that with Bruno before."

"Bruno and I are old friends," said Basil, with a pleasant smile. Annette thought that she had never seen such beautiful teeth.

"Oh, Bruno," she cried reproachfully, "and you never told me! Come here directly, sir!" Bruno approached her, wagging his tail. "Really old friends?" she asked, turning to Basil.

"No, not really," he replied. "What I mean is, I love dogs, and dogs love me."

"A good testimonial," remarked Anthony Bidaud, gazing with interest upon this poorly attired gentleman.

"I have found it so," responded Basil, "for dog and man."

He held out his hand to Annette, who not only took it, but retained it. This went far to complete the conquest of Anthony Bidaud.

With the ordinary tramp he was very familiar, but here was a man of another breed. No hang-dog looks, no slouching, no lowering of the brows, no prison-mark about him. An upright gentleman, who looked the man he was asking a favour from square in the face.

“Have you travelled far?” asked Anthony Bidaud.

“About twenty miles I should say. Rather too hot a day for so long a walk.”

“You must be tired,” said Anthony Bidaud.

“You are heartily welcome here.”

“I thank you,” said Basil.

That this young man had so swiftly won favour with his child and her four-footed protector was a sufficient recommendation to Bidaud, but independent of that, he was rejoiced to meet with a gentleman from whom manners and polish of good society had not been rubbed off by familiarity with the rougher aspects of life in the new world. Basil was a man whom no experience could harden; the inner grain of his nature was refined and sweet. The hardships he had already met with in the colony had not embittered him in the least. He grumbled at nothing, took all things easily, and showed a

smiling face to the world. When he presented himself to Anthony Bidaud he was really at his wit's end, but though he had not tasted food that day he was not discouraged or disheartened. A clean conscience is a wonderful sustainer. "I am like a cat," thought Basil, as he trudged blithely through the bush, "I am bound to fall on my feet." And fall on his feet he did that summer afternoon, which was to be the prelude of many happier days; for before the night was over he told his host sufficient of his antecedents to satisfy Bidaud that his hospitality was not likely to be misplaced. Upon his persuasion his guest remained for a week, then for another week, and so on till the present time. Bidaud was diffident in asking Basil to enter his service, and Basil, though he had come to the plantation with a vague idea of seeking employment, did not entertain it after his first introduction to Bidaud and his daughter. The terms upon which they had met and upon which he was received forbade his asking for employment. It was gentleman and gentleman, not master and servant. But at length Bidaud—who had learned sufficient to be aware that Basil's purse was empty, and that he had no friends

in the colony—delicately pressed his guest upon the subject, and, as timidly as though he was asking a favour instead of being anxious to bestow one, hinted at some business connection between them. Basil, from scruples with which we are familiar, but which he did not explain to his host, would not entertain the idea, but firmly and courteously set it aside.

“You have your future to look to,” said Bidaud.

“There is time enough to think of that,” said Basil, cheerfully. “I am not so very old.”

Many a time did Bidaud look with eyes of affection at Basil, and wish he had a son like him to whom he could entrust his darling Annette. Basil was a man peculiarly adapted to inspire affection in honest, simple hearts, and such a bond grew between him and Annette. Happy is the man whose manners cause children to regard him as one of themselves; he possesses an inheritance of pleasant hours which money cannot purchase. Basil and Annette, then, spent a great deal of time together, accompanied by the faithful Bruno, and it gladdened the father’s heart to see his child so happy in the society of their new friend.

"Father says your name is Whittingham," said Annette.

"Yes, it is," said the young man.

"Mr. Whittingham."

"Yes. Do you like it?"

"No. You must have another name."

"Of course I have. Basil."

"Basil. That is much nicer, ever so much nicer. I shall call you Basil."

"I shall feel honoured, Annette."

This compact being made, Annette took him in hand; the little maid had already discovered that she knew a great deal which he did not, and she set up a school, with Basil as her one pupil. Whether what she taught was likely to be of use to him in the battle of life he was bound to fight is an open question. Had some foreknowledge come upon him as to the nature of that battle, and the roads into which it would lead him, he would have laughingly rejected it as the wildest of fancies. He was quite content with the present; he had found an enchanting companion, and time was passing delightfully. During Annette's five years of motherless life she had acquired a wonderful knowledge of the fauna and the flora of the colony,

and to these mysteries she introduced Basil. It is not incorrect to call them mysteries, for they are really so to ninety-nine out of every hundred colonials, who spend their lives in ignorance of the wonders by which they are surrounded. But it is so in all lands.

Annette, then, opened Basil's mind, and let in knowledge. She showed him how to snare game, which abounded in vast quantities, snipe, quail, and numerous varieties of duck, of which the whistling duck is the most curious, and the black duck the best eating; she taught him the names of the strange and beautiful birds which found their home in the scrub and forests round about; she described to him the different trees which grew in the neighbourhood of the beautiful Pioneer River, and would not rest contented till he was familiar with them, and could give them their right names.

"What is this, Basil?"

"What is this, Annette? Why, a tree."

"But what kind of tree?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. Ha—hum—oh, yes, it is the tea-tree."

"It is not, Basil. It is the bottle-tree."

"Well, the bottle-tree. Of course it

is the bottle-tree. How could I be so stupid?"

"You are not stupid; you are inattentive. Do you see this hole cut in the tree?"

"Of course I do."

"I will not have that answer. 'Of course I do' sounds as if I had no right to ask the question. Say 'I do.'"

"I do."

"And mean it, if you please."

"I mean it," said Basil, with his hand on his heart, and a merry twinkle in his eyes.

"Very good. You see the hole. Who cut it?"

"On my word of honour, Annette, I haven't the slightest idea."

"It was cut by the blacks. Now, what did they cut it for?"

"How on earth should I know?"

"You ought to know. You have been brought up in a very bad school. I'll show you what for. Out with your knife, Basil. Dig it in here, a long way under the hole. That is right. Now you can have a good drink of cold sweet water. Is it not wonderful?"

"Indeed it is. Like *Oliver Twist*, I ask for more."

The conversation instantly took another turn. There were but few books on the home station, and among them no work of fiction. It fell to Basil's lot to open a new fairyland in the young girl's life. "What was *Oliver Twist*?" "He was not a 'what'; he was a 'who.'" "Then who was *Oliver Twist*?" Basil told the story as well as he could, and afterwards told another; and after the second tale, still another, this time a more simple one, from the magic cupboard of Hans Christian Andersen. It was long before they resumed their woodland lessons. Annette pointed out where the best figs and almonds grew, instructed him how to make bracelets and necklaces out of the stones of the quandong fruit, and where the sugar bags of the native bees were to be found. They caught a native bear, not a very ferocious creature, and tamed it in a few days so thoroughly that it followed them about like a dog, to the disgust of Bruno, who did not approve of the proceeding; they gathered wild ginger and wild nutmegs in the scrub, and in a famous creek they caught quantities of golden perch, with red eyes and double chins; and once they saw two emus in the distance, and heard

the faint sound of their peculiar whistle. In such-like idling the days flew by, and the hours were all too short, but suddenly it dawned upon Basil that this lotus life could not last for ever. It was from a sense of duty, and with a sinking heart (for the thought of parting from these good friends, especially from Annette, sorely oppressed him) that he intimated to Anthony Bidaud that he had lingered too long, and must go farther afield.

"I must not outstay my welcome," he said.

"You cannot do that," said Bidaud. "Are you not happy here?"

"Too happy."

"No, one cannot be too happy," said Bidaud, in a tone of great sadness. There was that weighing on his heart which he yearned to impart to some person in whom he could confide. He had thought of it for days past, and had resolved to unbosom his sorrow to the young gentleman who had brought a new light of tenderness into the prosperous home.

His story was told. Basil learned that the father feared he had not long to live, and

that he was filled with apprehension at the contemplation of Annette being left without a friend.

“You were born in Switzerland,” said Basil, thoughtfully. “Is there no one connected with you in your own country into whose charge you could give Annette?”

“It is twenty years since I left my native land,” said Bidaud, “and great changes must have taken place during that time.”

“You left relatives there?”

“Yes, a sister—and a brother.” His mention of his brother was made with evident reluctance.

“Why not write to your brother?” asked Basil, “to come and receive the trust?”

“Heaven forbid!” cried Bidaud. “Give my darling child into Gilbert’s care! I would as soon give her into the care of a wolf! No, no, it is not to be thought of. Six months ago I wrote to my sister, in whom I have some confidence—she is a woman, and would surely not ill-treat my child—informing her of my circumstances, and of the certain fate which awaited me, and imploring her to come out to me. I promised to provide for her, and for her family, if she had any. I thought

that the knowledge that I was rich would tempt her. To that letter I have received no reply. Basil,"—like his daughter, he called his guest by his Christian name—"it is the sad and sober truth that you are the only friend upon whom I can rely to render me a service. Will you do so?"

"If it is in my power," said Basil, gravely.

"You have given me the impression that you are alone in the world."

"Practically alone," replied Basil.

"With no kindred who have claims upon you."

"My parents are dead; I was their only child. There is but one man alive in England who is of my blood—an uncle whose heir I was to be, but who has cast me off."

"May I inquire for what reason?"

"For a very serious reason. I did not know the value of money, he said. My father, when he died, was heavily involved, and I ruined myself in paying his debts. My uncle was angry at this, saying there was no obligation upon me to satisfy my father's creditors. I held, and hold, a different opinion; but the consequence was that my uncle abandoned his intention of making me his heir."

“My task is all the easier for your explanation. The service I am about to ask of you is no light one, and may be agreeable to you because it will open out a future which few men would turn their back upon. I do not say this to tempt you, for I know that you will be guided entirely by your own feelings, by your own sense of right and wrong, and that worldly advantage will weigh for nothing in the scale. You are fond of Annette.”

“I love the child; I never met with a sweeter and more sympathetic nature than hers. She has strength of character, too.”

“Do you think so?” asked Bidaud, anxiously.

“I am sure of it. Even now she rules me.”

Bidaud shook his head with a sad smile. “That is not a proof. You are content to be ruled, and what passes between you springs from affection. The strength of character required to battle with the world is of a different kind from that which Annette exhibits towards you. The service I ask you to render me concerns Annette.”

“Why, then,” said Basil, gaily, “it is rendered before you ask for it.”

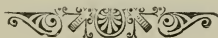
“You must know its nature before you consent. It is nothing more nor less, Basil, than that you should stand to my child in the light of guardian.”

Basil started. The tone in which this was spoken was that of a man who was convinced that the world was slipping from him.

“Surely you are alarming yourself unnecessarily,” said the young man.

“I am not. There are warnings which it would be criminal to neglect, especially where there is such a vital interest at stake as the happiness of an only and beloved child. I have received these warnings and must be prepared. Say that the spiritual whisper which tells me that my end is approaching is false, is no faith to be placed in the doctor’s decree that my hours are numbered? A man may have morbid fancies, but the teachings of experience and science are not to be lightly set aside and disregarded. If my fears prove groundless, so much the better for Annette; if they are confirmed—which they will be, Basil, nothing can alter it—so much the worse for her unless needful preparation is made for the crisis in her young life. Will you now consent?”

“ Let me hear more fully what you have to say,” replied Basil, gravely, “ before I fully pledge myself. You speak of a brother and sister in your own country, and you have written to one who may appear at any moment. The claim she has upon Annette, and the authority with which the laws of nature have invested her, are stronger than those of any stranger. I am a young man, and the idea of becoming guardian to so tender and sweet a flower as Annette startles me. I ask myself, am I equal to a responsibility so serious, and the question reveals to me my own deficiencies, of which I am generally somewhat painfully aware. It is really as though the most serious page in my life was about to be opened.”



CHAPTER III.

“ I HAVE no fears,” said Anthony Bidaud, with a gentle smile, “ on the score of your deficiencies. I have been no inattentive observer since the fortunate day upon which I first formed acquaintance with you. That you have had a disappointment in life counts for very little, and such small difficulties as befall a newcomer in this new land are scarcely to be accounted among the real difficulties of life. You do not yet know your own strength, but already, in a position of serious responsibility, you have acted in a manner which few men would have had the courage to do. Your past is honourable, and contents me. You have a kind heart, and that adds to my content. Should the worst happen, my Annette will have by her side a true and honest counsellor. Reflect a moment. Say that I were to die to-morrow—nay, do not argue with me ; death is the only certain thing in life, and it

may come at any unexpected moment to the strongest—say that I die to-morrow, what would be the position of my dear child? I have an estate worth thousands of pounds; she is a mere child, and could not manage it. She would become the prey of schemers, who would undoubtedly not deal fairly by her. I have a hundred servants on this plantation, and not a friend among them. By accident you enter into our lives. I use the term accident, but I believe it to be a providence. We are drawn to each other. I have observed you closely, and am satisfied to deliver into your hands a sacred charge, the charge of a young girl's future. At such moments as these there comes to some men a subtle, unfathomable insight. It comes to me. I firmly believe that there is a link between you and my child which, if you do not recognise it now, you will be bound to recognise in the future. It may be broken in the present, but the threads will be joined as surely as we stand here side by side. Apart from this mysticism, to which I do not expect you to subscribe, there is a worldly, practical side which it is right and necessary you should understand. You ask for fuller information of my brother and sister.

I will give it to you. That my brother and I did not part friends, and that his attitude towards me influenced my sister, was not my fault. I loved a young girl in my own station in life, and she loved me and afterwards became my wife. That my brother Gilbert loved her also was to be deplored; we were not to be blamed for it, though Gilbert was furious—with me for loving her, with her for returning my love. I endeavoured to remonstrate with him: he would not listen to me. ‘You have stepped in the way of my happiness,’ he said; ‘you shall rue it.’ It is hard to speak harshly of one’s flesh and blood, but it is the truth that the girl I loved was fortunate in not placing her affections upon him. He would have broken her heart. He was a spendthrift and a libertine, and would stop at little for the gratification of his selfish pleasures. He was furious against me, not so much because he loved Annette’s mother, but because he could not have his own way. He was clever in crooked things, and in cunning shrewdness there were few to beat him. Educated as a doctor, he could have earned a good name if he had chosen to be industrious; but he preferred to lead an idle, dissolute life.

These evil courses caused him to be deeply in debt at the time of my father's death. A portion of my father's fortune, which was not very large, was left to me, and Gilbert endeavoured to rob me of it, saying he was the elder, as he was by a year. With wedded life in view I resisted the attempt, and this angered him the more. He swore that he would never forgive me, and that he would be revenged upon me. It was strange that my sister leaned more towards him than towards me, but that does sometimes happen with the scapegrace of the family. I am not endeavouring to blacken Gilbert's character for my own glorification. In drawing his picture I have dealt more than justly by him ; were he not my brother I should speak of actions of his which made me wonder how he and I could have been born of the same mother. It is that I wish you to understand why I did not write to him to come here and take charge of my dear child, and to understand why I said that I would as soon give her into the care of a wolf. I succeeded in obtaining my share of my father's fortune, and soon afterwards married. Even then Gilbert did not cease from persecuting me. He would

come and take up his quarters in our house, and insult my wife, and revile me, until our life became intolerable. It was then that we resolved to emigrate, chiefly to escape his persecutions. Then he showed us plainly that his love had changed to hate. He said to me before I left Switzerland, ‘One day I will be even with you. Remember my words—dead or alive, I will be even with you!’ Since that day I have never seen him, never heard from him, and I do not know whether he is still living. Upon our arrival in this colony fortune smiled upon us almost from the first. We were happy, very happy, and as you see I have been prosperous. But I have not been wise. I should have provided my child with a suitable companion at the death of my wife, though heaven knows where I should have found one ; but I should have tried. To marry again was impossible ; I loved my wife too well, and I could not be false to her memory. I have been worse than unwise ; I have neglected a serious duty. Up to this day I have shrunk from making a will, so that my affairs would get into confusion should anything happen to me. I have resolved to make instant amends for this neglect

of duty. To-night I shall write to a lawyer to come to me without an hour's delay, and he shall draw out my will before he departs. In this will it is my desire to appoint you manager of my estate and guardian of my child till she arrives at the age of twenty-one. It is not a bad prospect I hold out to you. At the end of seven years you will still be a young man, and if you elect to leave Annette you can do so. She will by that time have learned from you all that is necessary to continue the management of the estate herself; but she will also then be free to act as she pleases: either to remain upon it, or to sell it and go elsewhere. I do not think there is anything more I can tell you to enable you to arrive at a decision. I do not urge you to comply with my desire because of any personal advantage that may accrue to yourself, but I beg of you as a friend to render me as great a service as it is in the power of one man to render to another. If you wish for time to consider this proposal take it, but decide before the arrival of the lawyer. One way or another, my will must be made before a week has passed."

But Basil did not ask for time; he was deeply touched by the confidence reposed in

him by Anthony Bidaud, and while the father spoke he had made up his mind. He had been very happy on the plantation; he knew that it was a desirable home, and that within its domains could be found much that would make a man's life agreeable and useful. He had come to the colony, as had thousands of other colonists, with the intention of making his fortune and returning to England. He could not hope to make a fortune in a day, though wild ideas of gold-seeking—successful gold-seeking, of course—had floated through his mind. Suddenly, when his fortunes were at the lowest ebb, there was presented an opportunity which, unworldly as he was, he could not disguise from himself it would be folly to throw away. But it was due to Anthony Bidaud that the matter should not be concluded without something more being said.

“I need no time to consider,” he said. “Your proposition is flattering and advantageous to myself. But you speak of not being wise. Are you wise in placing a trust so delicate and important in the hands of a stranger?”

“I am content to do so,” said Bidaud, “and

I beg you to believe that the obligation will be on my side."

"After all," suggested Basil, with a little touch of shrewdness, "it may be with you a choice of evils."

"It is a choice of good," observed Bidaud.

"I have told you," continued Basil, "that I have not been educated into an understanding of business matters, and that my mission in life"—here he smiled deprecatingly—"was to go through life in a gentlemanly way, without working for my living."

"But you came to the colony to work?"

"Yes. I am only endeavouring to prove to you how utterly unfit I am for the position you would assign to me."

"I am entirely convinced," said Bidaud, with a look of affection at the young man, "of your fitness for it."

"Think of my inexperience."

"Experience will come to you as it came to me. You will learn as I did."

"Then there is another view," said Basil, and now he spoke with a certain hesitation. "You and Annette are here as father and daughter. It is not to be supposed that I could supply your place. I am a young man ;

in a very few years Annette will be a young woman. Will not our relative positions then be likely to wound her susceptibilities——”

“Do not finish,” said Bidaud, pressing Basil’s hand warmly. “Leave all to time. Nothing but good can spring from what I propose. If Annette were now a young woman——”

And here he himself purposely broke off in the middle of a sentence. Certainly his meaning could not be mistaken. A flush came into Basil’s face, and he did not speak again for a few moments.

“Has the letter,” he then said, “you wrote to your sister been returned to you?”

“No.”

“Then it must have been delivered.”

“Not necessarily. I am not sure whether undelivered letters addressed to Switzerland are returned to the colonial post-offices. If you have stated your principal objections I see nothing in them to cause you to hesitate. You will consent?”

“Yes,” said Basil, “I accept the trust.”

“With all my heart I thank you,” said Anthony Bidaud; then he placed his hands

on Basil's shoulders, and said in a solemn tone, "Guard my child."

"Whatever lies in my power to do," said Basil, "shall be done."

Bidaud nodded and turned away; his heart was too full to say more. Basil turned in another direction, with the intention of seeking Annette, in fulfilment of a promise he had made to join her in the woods. He knew where to find her.



CHAPTER IV.

TRAVERSING a narrow, winding bridle track, he soon reached the river. A broad belt of white sand stretched on either side for some little distance, the water glistening like polished mirrors in its smooth deep reaches. Here and there it broke into a thousand tiny silver-crested waves, created by the inequalities in the ground. Farther on the main stream twisted into great clusters of dark green river oaks, and was lost to view. The white sands narrowed, and were replaced by rocks, covered with moss and lichen, and here a bark canoe was moored. Stepping on a large boulder, Basil jumped into the canoe, and loosening the rope, paddled down stream. The water ran like a mill race, and presently divided into two streams, beautified by waterfalls and fairy islands adorned with luxuriant vegetation. This dividing of the waters extended only some three or four hundred yards,

at the termination of which they were united in one dark lagoon. A strange stillness reigned upon the surface of the water, but this sign of peace was insincere, the current in reality running hard and strong. Round about the canoe floated masses of white and mauve water lilies ; in parts the huge leaves formed a perfect carpet, which easily supported the light weight of the lotus birds as they skipped from shore to shore. At the lower end of the lagoon the stream became so narrow that a man could jump across it, and here Basil left his canoe, and plunged into the woods to find Annette.

She was sitting on a great patch of velvet moss, idling with some flowers of the wax plant and the yellow hibiscus. Her back was towards Basil, who stepped softly, intending to surprise her, but the crackling of the leaves betrayed him. She turned quickly, and jumping up, ran to meet him.

“ I have been waiting for you ever so long,” she said, and she slipped her hand into his.

Basil made no excuse for being late ; an age seemed to have passed since he had last seen her, though scarcely three hours separated “ then ” from “ now.” But short as

was really the interval it had effected an important alteration in their relations towards each other, and the contemplation of this change made him silent. Neither was Annette as talkative as usual, and they strolled idly along for some distance without exchanging a word. Basil had hitherto accepted Annette's beauty in a general sense; she was pretty, she was bright, she was full of vivacity—that was all. Had she been a woman he would have subjected her to a closer and more analytical observation, for he had an artist's eye for beauty, and loved to look at it in animate and inanimate nature; but Annette was only a child, and he had paid her just that amount of attention which one pays to small wild-flowers that grow by the wayside. But now, looking down upon her as she walked by his side, he observed that her eyes were hazel, and he said to himself that hazel eyes, in girl and woman, were the most beautiful eyes in the world. The hazel colour in the eyes he was gazing upon was brilliant, and Basil said to himself that it was the brilliant hazel eyes that are the most beautiful in the world. Annette's features were not exactly regular, but formed as fair a picture

of human loveliness as a man would wish to see, her lips sweetly curved, her teeth white and shapely, her ears like little shells, her golden brown hair gathered carelessly about the gracefully shaped head. Yes, Annette was beautiful even now as a child ; how much more beautiful was she likely to be when her springtime was fully set in !

Raising her head suddenly she saw that Basil was gazing at her more earnestly and closely than he was in the habit of doing.

“ I was looking at your eyes, Annette,” he said, rather guiltily. “ I never noticed their colour till to-day.”

“ They are hazel. Do you like hazel eyes ? ”

“ Very much.”

“ I am glad of that. My eyes are like my mother’s. Will you come with me ? ”

“ Where ? ”

“ To her grave.”

He had visited it before with Annette, and they now walked towards the canoe, gathering wild flowers as they walked. Once Annette slipped, and he caught her and held her up ; there was an unusual tenderness in the action, and Annette nestled closer to him, and smiled

happily. In the canoe her skilful fingers were busily at work, weaving the flowers they had gathered into garlands to lay upon her mother's grave. She had a special gift in such-like graceful tasks, but then her heart was in her fingers. The loving homage was reverently rendered when they reached the spot, and Basil assisted her in clearing the dead leaves and in planting some fresh roots she had brought with her from the woods.

Her task accomplished, Annette sat beside the grave, with a wistful expression on her face which made Basil wonder what was stirring in her mind. He waited for her to break the silence, and presently she spoke.

“What makes you so quiet, Basil?”

“I do not know. Perhaps it is because you have said so little, Annette.”

“I have been thinking.”

“Yes?”

“I wanted all day to speak to you about it. I thought I would when we were in the wood alone; then you spoke of my eyes and I thought of my dear mother. You would have loved her, Basil, and she would have loved you. She hears me now—yes, she

hears and sees me, Basil, and I think she is glad you came to us."

"I am glad too, Annette."

"Really glad, Basil?"

"Really glad, Annette."

"Then you will not go away from us?"

"What makes you ask that?" Her question, tremulously uttered, formed a pregnant link in the promise he had given her father.

"It is my dream," said Annette. "I dreamt it last night, and it made me sad. You came to say good-bye, and I was unhappy at the thought that I should never see you again. Basil, if that was to happen I should be sorry you ever came at all."

"Then you wish me to stay?"

"Dearly, Basil, dearly! I thought I would speak to father about it; then I thought I would speak to you first."

"Did you not speak to your father?"

"Not about my dream; but about your going away," yes. I asked him to persuade you to stop with us."

"Because, Annette——" he said, and paused.

"Because I love you, Basil. I told father so, and he said he loved you, too, and that he

wished he had a son like you. Then you would be my brother, and I should be very happy. But father said he was afraid you intended to leave us soon, and that made me dream, I suppose."

"Annette, listen to me."

"I am listening, Basil."

"Your father has spoken to me, and that is why I was so late in coming to you. He asked me to remain here, and I promised him I would."

"You did? Oh, Basil!" Her voice expressed the most perfect joy. She had risen in her excitement, and was now leaning towards him, her lips parted, her eyes glowing.

"Yes, Annette, I promised him, and I promise you. For some years at least we will live together."

She threw her arms round his neck, and kissed him.

"That will be for ever, Basil. You have made me so happy, so happy!"

"So that is all settled," he said. "But I shall be a tyrant, Annette."

"I don't mind, Basil; I will be very good and obedient. Do you hear, Bruno, do you hear?" She knelt and kissed the faithful

dog, and pressed his head to her bosom. "Basil is not going away. He will remain here for ever—for ever!"

Basil was very grateful for the little maid's affection, grateful that his lines had fallen in such pleasant places. What more could man desire? But there was a shadow gathering and swiftly approaching which neither of them could see.

They stopped out later than usual that evening, and when they returned to the house Annette was radiant.

"Basil has promised to remain with us, father," she said, in a voice of great joy.

"He has told you, then, dear child?"

"Yes, father, yes. He will stop with us for ever. I don't wish for anything now."

The three happy beings sat together in the verandah during the few brief minutes that divided day and night. In those latitudes there is but little twilight, and the long peaceful rest of an English sunset is unknown. For a few moments the brilliancy was dazzling. Great clouds of amethyst and ruby spread over the western skies, melting soon into soberer shades of purple and crimson. Then the sun dipped down and disappeared,

and the skies were overspread with a veil of faded gold, behind which the white stars glittered.

Their souls were in harmony with the spiritual influence of the lovely scene, and there was an ineffable peace in their hearts. Annette kissed Basil before she retired to rest, and whispered : “ Brother Basil, I shall have happier dreams to-night.”

He kissed her tenderly, and bade her good-night. Unclouded happiness shone in her eyes as she stole to her room, where she knelt by her bedside, and uttered the name of Basil in her prayers.

Anthony Bidaud gazed at his daughter till she entered the house, and even then kept his eyes fixed upon the door through which she had disappeared.

“ It is years,” he said to Basil, “ since I have felt so thoroughly content as I do to-night. Come to my room early in the morning ; I shall not write to my lawyer till then, and I wish you to see the letter.”

Shortly after all the inmates of the house were asleep.

* * * * *

And while they slept, there walked across

the distant plains towards the plantation, a man and a woman who had had that goal in view for three months past. It was summer when they left their home across the seas. It was summer when they reached the land to which the woman had been summoned. But, judging from their faces, no summer errand was theirs.

“Walk quicker,” said the man, surlily. “We must get there before sunrise. My heart is bent upon it.”

“I am fit to drop,” said the woman. “How much farther have we to go?”

“According to information, fifteen miles. Walk quicker, quicker! Have you travelled so far to faint at the last moment? Remember we have not one penny left to purchase food, and have already fasted too many hours. I see visions of ease and comfort, of wine and food, ay, and of riches too. I am eager to get at them.”

“Do you remember,” said the woman, “that you were not bidden to come?”

“What of that?” retorted the man. “I have my tale ready. Leave me to play my part. Our days of poverty are over. This is the last of them. Walk quicker, quicker!”

CHAPTER V.

A LITTLE after sunrise Basil was awake and out, hastening to the river for his morning bath. He had slept well and soundly, but he had had vivid dreams. The events of the day had sunk deep in his mind ; it would have been strange otherwise, for they had altered the currents of his whole future life. They had furnished him with a secure and happy home ; they had placed him in a position of responsibility which he hailed with satisfaction and a sense of justifiable pride ; moreover, they had assured him that he had won the affection of a kind and generous gentleman and of a sweet-tempered and gentle little maid. He was no longer an outcast ; he was no longer alone in the world.

Until this void was supplied he had not felt it. Young, buoyant, and with a fund of animal spirits which was the secret of his cheerful nature, sufficient for the day had been the good thereof ; but now quite sud-

denly an unexpected and sweetly serious duty had been offered to him, and he had accepted it. He would perform it faithfully and conscientiously.

Every word Anthony Bidaud had spoken to him had impressed itself upon his mind. He could have repeated their conversation almost word for word. It was this which had inspired his dreams, which formed, as it were, a panorama of the present and the future.

Annette as she was at this moment, a child, appeared to him, and he lived over again their delightful rambles ; for although it was but yesterday that they were enjoyed, the duty he had taken upon himself seemed to send them far back into the past ; but still Annette was a child, and her sunny ways belonged to childhood. The story of "Paul and Virginia" had been a favourite with him when he was a youngster, and his dreams at first were touched by the colour of that simple tale. The life he had lived these last few weeks on Anthony Bidaud's plantation favoured the resemblance ; the South-Sea Islanders who worked on the land, the waterfalls, the woods, the solitudes, the protecting bond which linked him to Annette — all

formed in his sleeping fancies a companion idyll to the charming creation of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. He carried Annette over the river, he wandered with her through the shadows of the mountains, they were lost and found, they sat together under the shade of the velvet sunflower-tree; and in this part of his dreams he himself was a youth and not a man.

So much for the present, and it was due to his light heart and the happiness he had found that his dreams did not take the colour of the subsequent tragedy which brought the lives of these woodland children to their sad and pathetic end. His future and Annette's was brighter than that of Paul and Virginia. He beheld her as a woman, and he was still her protector. She represented the beauty of the entire world of thought and action. Her figure was faultless, her face most lovely, her movements gracefully perfect. There are countenances upon which an eternal cloud appears to rest, and which even when they smile are not illumined. Upon Annette's countenance rested an eternal sunshine, and this quality of light irradiated not only all surrounding visible objects, but all hopes and

feelings of the heart. When Basil awoke these felicitous fancies were not obliterated or weakened, as most such fancies are in waking moments, and as he walked towards the river they lightened his footsteps and made him glad. Wending his way along a cattle track dotted with gum-trees, he saw beneath the branches of one a woman whose face was strange to him. She was not English born, and as she reclined in an attitude of fatigue against the tree's trunk there was about her an air of exhaustion which stirred Basil to compassion for her apparently forlorn condition. He remembered his own days and nights of weary tramping through the bush, and, pausing, he looked down upon her, and she peered up at him through her half-closed lids.

“Good morning,” said Basil.

“Is it?” she asked, with a heavy sigh.

“Is it what?”

“Good morning. To me it is a bad morning.”

Basil looked round. The heavens were luminous with vivid colour, the birds were flying busily to and from their nests, nature's myriad pulses throbbed with gladness. To

him it was the best, the brightest of days. But this sad woman before him was pale and worn ; there were traces not only of exhaustion but of hunger in her face.

“ You are hungry,” said Basil.

“ Don’t mock me,” said the woman, in no gracious tone ; “ let me rest.”

“ If you follow this track,” persisted Basil, “ the way I have come, you will see the Home Station. They will give you breakfast there.”

For a moment the woman appeared inclined to accept his kindness ; she made a movement upwards, but almost immediately she relinquished her intention.

“ No,” she said, “ I will wait.”

He was loth to leave her in her distressful plight, but her churlish manner was discouraging.

“ Will you not let me help you ? ”

“ You can help me,” said the woman, “ by leaving me.”

He had no alternative. “ If you think better of it,” he said, “ you can obtain shelter and food at the Home Station.” Then he passed on to the river.

A stranger was there, already stripping for

the purpose of bathing. Scarcely looking at him, Basil was about to remove to a more retired spot when he observed something in the water which caused him to run to the man, who was removing his last garment, and seize his arm.

“What for?” demanded the stranger.

He spoke fairly good English, as did the woman who had declined his assistance, but with a foreign accent. He was brown, and thin, and wrinkled, and Basil saw at once that he was not an Englishman.

“I presume you have not breakfasted yet,” was Basil’s apparently inconsequential answer to the question.

“Not yet,” said the stranger impatiently, shaking himself free from Basil’s grasp. “Why do you stop me? Is not the river free?”

“Quite free,” said Basil; “but instead of eating you may be eaten.”

He pointed downwards, and leaning forward the stranger beheld a huge alligator lurking beneath a thin thicket of reeds. The brute was perfectly motionless, but all its voracious senses were on the alert.

“Ugh!” cried the stranger, beginning to

dress hurriedly. "That would be a bad commencement of my business."

He did not say "thank you," nor make the slightest acknowledgment of the service Basil had rendered him. This jarred upon the young man, who stood watching him get into his clothes. They were ragged and travel-stained, and the stranger's physical condition was evidently none of the best; but his eyes were keen, and all his intellectual forces were awake. In this respect Basil found an odd resemblance in him to the alligator waiting for prey in the waving reeds beneath, and also a less odd resemblance to the woman he had left lying in the shadow of the gum-trees.

"You have business here, then?" asked the young man.

"I have—important business. Understand that I answer simply to prove that I am not an intruder."

"I understand. Is the woman I met on my way a relative of yours?"

"What woman?" cried the stranger, in sharp accents.

"Like you in face, and bearing about her signs of hard travel."

"Did she speak to you? Why do

you question me about her? By what right?"

"There is no particular right in question that I can see," said Basil. "I spoke to her as I am speaking to you, and asked if I could serve her."

"And she?"

"Was as uncivil as yourself, and declined my offers of assistance."

"She acted well. We are not beggars. For my incivility, that is how you take it. You misconstrue me."

"I am glad to hear it. You seem tired."

"I have been walking all day and all night, and all day and night again, for more days and nights than I care to count. I have done nothing but walk, walk, walk, since my arrival at this world's end."

"Have you but just arrived?"

"Yes, but just arrived, wearied and worn out with nothing but walking, walking, walking. Is that what this world's end was made for?"

If the stranger had not stated that he had important business to transact, and had there not been something superior in his speech and deportment to the ordinary tramp with

whom every man in the Australian colonies is familiar, Basil would have set him down as a member of that delectable fraternity. Notwithstanding this favourable opinion, however, Basil took an instinctive dislike to the man. He had seen in him an odd likeness to the alligator, and brief as had been their interview up to this point, he had gone the length of mentally comparing him now to a fox, now to a jackal—to any member of the brute species indeed whose nature was distinguished by the elements of rapacity and cunning.

“Have you far to go?” he asked.

“No farther,” replied the stranger, with an upward glance at Anthony Bidaud’s house, one end of which was visible from the spot upon which they were conversing.

“Is that your destination?” inquired Basil, observing the upward glance.

“That,” said the stranger, with a light laugh, “is my destination, if I have not been misinformed.”

The laugh intensified Basil’s dislike; there was a mocking sinister ring in it, but he nevertheless continued the conversation.

“Misinformed in what respect?”

“That is M. Bidaud’s house?”

“It is M. Bidaud’s house.”

“M. Anthony Bidaud?”

“Yes.”

“Originally from Switzerland.”

Basil’s hazard of the stranger’s precise nationality now took definite form.

“As you are,” he said.

“As I am,” said the stranger, “and as Anthony Bidaud is.”

“You are right in your surmise. He is from Switzerland.”

“My surmise? Ah! He has a fine estate here.”

“He has.”

“But his wife—she is dead.”

“That is so, unhappily.”

“What is one man’s meat is another man’s poison—a proverb that may be reversed.” His small eyes glittered, and his thin pointed features seemed all to converge to one point. (“Fox, decidedly,” thought Basil.) The stranger continued. “His health, is it good?”

In the light of Anthony Bidaud’s revelation on the previous evening this was a startling question, and Basil answered, “It is an in-

quiry you had best make of himself if you are likely to see him."

"It is more than likely that I shall see him," said the stranger, "and he will tell me. He has but one child."

"You are well informed. He has but one."

"Whose name is Annette?"

"Whose name," said Basil, wondering from what source the stranger had obtained his information, "is Annette."

"Charming, charming, charming," said the stranger. "Everything is charming, except,"—with a loathing gesture at the alligator, which lay still as a log, waiting for prey—"that monster; and except also that I am dead with fatigue. I came here for a bath to refresh myself after much travelling. Is there any part of this treacherous river in which a man may bathe in safety?"

"I will show you a place."

"No tricks, young sir," said the stranger, suspicion in his voice.

"Why should I play you tricks? If you do not care to trust me, seek a secure spot yourself."

"No, I will accompany you, who must know the river well. You do, eh?"

“I am thoroughly acquainted with it.”

“You guessed my nation; shall I guess yours? Australian.”

“I am an Englishman.”

“A great nation; a great people. Is this the spot?”

They had arrived at a smooth reach of water, semicircularly protected by rocks from the invasion of alligators.

“This is the spot,” said Basil, “you will be perfectly safe here.”

The water was so clear that they could see to the bottom. Black and silver bream, perch, mullet, and barramundi were swimming in its translucent depths. The stranger peered carefully among the rocks to make sure that they were free from foes, and then, without thanking Basil, began to strip off his clothes.

“And you—where will you bathe?”

“A little farther up stream. Good-morning.”

“Ah, good morning; but I may see you again if you are living near.”

“I live,” said Basil, “in the house yonder.”

CHAPTER VI.

A SUDDEN excitement was observable in the stranger. He paused in his undressing, and laid his hand on Basil's arm, clutching with nervous fingers.

"You are very intimate with M. Anthony Bidaud?" he said.

"We are friends."

"Friends? Ah! You are not related? No, you cannot be, for you are English. Yet there are other ties. His wife is dead, you say, and as I know. Yes, dead. But he may be looking for another, may be already married again." He spoke in feverish haste. ("A touch of the jackal here," thought Basil.) "Tell me, you friend of M. Anthony Bidaud."

"He is not married again," said Basil, "and to my knowledge is not seeking another wife."

The stranger drew a long breath of relief,

followed immediately by the exhibition of a new suspicion.

“His daughter, Annette—if he spoke truth a child. But men lie sometimes, very often, you, I, all men. He married long, long ago, and this Annette may well be a young woman of twenty.” He scowled as he looked at Basil’s handsome face. “Is she married, or going to be?”

“Absurd,” said Basil, but a little touch of colour came into his face which the sharp eyes of the stranger noted, “she is scarcely fourteen years of age.”

“Good, good. Time, let us hope, to prevent mischief. But, pardon me, if you live in the house of M. Bidaud, there must be a reason. You do not look like a common labourer; you are something better, a gentleman—eh?” Again all his thin pointed features seemed, foxlike, to converge to one point.

“I am a gentleman,” said Basil, “and I am staying with M. Bidaud as a guest.” He referred to the present, not feeling warranted in speaking of the future. The arrangement he had entered into with Anthony Bidaud had yet to be carried into effect.

“ Ah, ah, as a guest, only as a guest, but with an eye to the future, perhaps. M. Anthony Bidaud is rich, and in two years his daughter, his only child, will be sixteen, and nearly ripe. There is a saying, is there not, among you English that welcomes the coming and speeds the parting guest? I have been in your country, and know something of its literature, and in my own land my education was not neglected. That saying about the coming and parting guest is a good omen, for I have but just arrived, and you——”

But Basil did not wait to hear the conclusion of the sentence. Annoyed at the turn the conversation had taken he turned on his heel, and left the stranger to enjoy his bath. He walked slowly to his own, rather ruffled by the interview.

“ Who can he be? ” he thought, as he prepared for his swim. “ He seems to be acquainted with M. Bidaud and with his personal history. What on earth made me answer his interminable questions? His pertinacity, I suppose, and a kind of magnetism in him which it was hard to resist. But I might have been courteous without being communicative. I said nothing, however, of

my own prompting, and his questions followed each other naturally. What he learnt from me he could have learnt from a dozen others, and after all there is no harm done. He certainly has the knack of rubbing the wrong way; an extraordinarily annoying fellow, but neither loutish nor ignorant. That is why I was constrained to follow his lead. This is his destination; his business, then, must be with M. Bidaud. Important business, he said—and with Annette's father. I did not like his references to Annette. Will it be right or wrong for me to convey my impressions of this stranger to M. Bidaud? Wrong. I will merely mention that I met with such a man, who was coming to the house upon business. He spoke of having walked a long way. He must be poor, or he would have chosen another mode of conveyance, especially as he seems to be in somewhat feverish haste. Being poor is nothing against him; I am poor myself. Psha! What a worry I am making of nothing!"

He could not dismiss the subject, however, and the currents of his thoughts ran on even as he swam.

"The woman I met on my way to the

river; how skilfully he evaded my inquiries as to the relationship between them! His tone when he spoke of her showed that he had power over her. I have not the least doubt he is the kind of man who can make himself intensely disagreeable, Poor woman! There is a resemblance in their features; I have read that husband and wife frequently grow like each other in face. She was hungry, but she declined the offer of a good meal. Acting, I should say, under her husband's instructions, and too frightened of him to disobey him. Faithful creatures, women. Patient as camels some of them and as docile. A hard tramp she seems to have had of it, and he has not spared her. Well, she can rest here a few days. Would I like them to remain on the plantation? No. He would keep me in a continual state of irritation. His allusions to Annette were in the worst of taste. I dare say before the day is out I shall know the nature of his business. M. Bidaud will tell me. Confound the fellow! I'll not think of him any more."

As a contribution towards this end he plunged half a dozen times into the deepest parts of the river, and finally emerged, glow-

ing. The disturbing impressions produced by the stranger were dissipated, and Basil thought it would look churlish if on his road back to the house he did not go to see whether he could be of any service to him. He saw nothing, however, of the man or the woman, and greatly refreshed, he proceeded to the house. The sun was now high in the heavens, and the labourers were at work on the plantation. He exchanged greetings with a few of the better sort, and inquired whether they had seen anything of the strangers. They replied in the negative ; they had seen nothing of them.

“Have you, Rocke?” he asked of one who was regarding him with a scowl.

“No,” said Rocke. “What business is it of mine?”

It was Rocke’s misfortune to always wear a scowl on his face, but in this scowl there were degrees. To produce an amiable smile was with Rocke an impossibility ; nature had been cruel, and his parents, one or both of them, had transmitted to him a sour temper as an inheritance ; but the state of his feelings could be correctly judged by the kind of scowl he wore ; a nice observer could scarcely

make a mistake as to whether he tolerated, disliked, or hated the man he was gazing on. There could be no mistake made now ; he hated Basil.

There was a reason. Every man has his good points, even the worst of men, and Rocke's good point was that he conscientiously performed the duties for which he was engaged. However hard the work before him, done it was with a will—and a scowl. Now, this was a distinct virtue, and Anthony Bidaud gave him credit for it, and appreciated the conscientious worker, as any other master would do of a man who gave him full value for his wage. So far, so good ; master and man were satisfied. But before Basil's arrival on the plantation Rocke had got it into his head—which was not an intellectual head — that Anthony Bidaud entertained the notion of creating a general supervisor and manager of the estate, and that he, Rocke, was the man to be appointed ; and since Basil's arrival his ambitious dream was disturbed by the conviction that Basil would step into the shoes he wished to wear.

“I don't know that it is any business of

yours," said Basil to Rocke, "only I thought you might have seen these persons."

"Well, I haven't," said Rocke.

Basil nodded cheerfully, and proceeded towards the house. He was not a man of paroxysms; except upon very special occasions his temperament was equable. As to whether Rocke had spoken the truth or no he did not speculate; it was not in Rocke he was interested, but in the man and the woman with whom he had spoken on his way to the river.

Anthony Bidaud was an early riser, and Basil went to the room in which the master of the plantation was in the habit of transacting his private business. He knocked twice or thrice at the door without receiving an answer, and then, turning the handle, he entered the room.

Anthony Bidaud was reclining in the chair in which he usually sat when engaged in correspondence. His back was towards Basil, and before him on the table writing materials were spread. He sat quite still, and for a moment or two the young man was uncertain what to do. Then he called Bidaud by name. No answer came, and Basil, surprised

at the stillness, advanced to Bidaud, and stood immediately behind him. Still no notice was taken of Basil. Then he laid his hand upon Bidaud's shoulder. The occupant of the chair did not move, and Basil leaned anxiously forward to look into his face. At first Basil believed him to be asleep, but a closer examination sent the blood rushing to the young man's heart in terror. Bidaud's arm hung listlessly by his side, and upon his face dwelt an expression of acute suffering. Again Basil called him by name, and shook him roughly, but no responsive word or movement greeted him from the quiet figure in the chair. Basil thrust his hand into Bidaud's shirt over the region of his heart, and trembled to meet with no pulsation there. He raised Bidaud's arm and released it. It dropped lifeless down.

"Merciful heavens!" cried Basil, looking helplessly around. "Can this be death?"

The question he asked of himself was heard by another man. The stranger he had met on the banks of the river had noiselessly opened the door, and now advanced to the chair.

"Who speaks of death?" asked the

stranger. "Ah, it is you, who are a guest in this house. And I find you and him"—he stretched a long bony finger at the recumbent figure of Anthony Bidaud—"here together, alone. You with a face of fear, terror, and excitement; he quite still, quite still!"

He was perfectly composed, and there was a malicious smile on his lips as he confronted Basil. Dazed by the situation, Basil could find no words to reply.

"You are confounded," continued the stranger. "It needs explanation. Who is this man sitting so quietly in his chair?"

"M. Anthony Bidaud," said Basil, with white lips, "the master of this house."

"Ah, M. Anthony Bidaud, the master of this house," said the stranger, echoing Basil's words, but whereas Basil's voice was agitated, his had not a tremor in it. "I will see if you are speaking the truth." He lowered his face, and his eyes rested upon the face of the motionless figure. "Yes, it is he, Anthony Bidaud, worn, alas! and wasted. Sad, sad, sad!" Grief was expressed in the words but not in the tone of the speaker. "What was it you asked a moment ago? Can this be death? I am a doctor. I will tell you."

Lifting the lifeless form in his arms he laid it upon a couch, and tearing open the shirt and waistcoat, placed his ear to Anthony Bidaud's heart; then took his pulse between finger and thumb. He proceeded with his examination by taking from his pocket a little leather case containing a small comb and a narrow slip of looking-glass. Rubbing the surface of the glass dry with a handkerchief that had dropped to the ground, he passed it over the mouth of Anthony Bidaud; then held it up to the light.

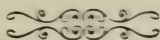
"Yes," he said, looking Basil full in the face, "it is death. It is lucky I travelled hither in the night, and did not allow myself to be delayed by fatigue. Fortune, I thank you. You have treated me scurvily hitherto; at length you relent, and smile upon me. Being a lady, I kiss my hand to you."

There was something so inexpressibly heartless in the action that Basil cried indignantly, "Who are you, and by what right have you intruded yourself into this room?"

The stranger did not immediately reply. He felt in his pocket for a snuff-box, and producing it regaled himself with a pinch.

He offered the box to Basil, who pushed it aside. He smiled and replaced the box in his pocket, and was also about to replace the leather case, when an amusing thought occurred to him. He dressed his hair with the comb, and gazed at himself in the glass with an affectation of vanity. His smile broadened as he noticed the look of horror in Basil's face.

"You wish to know," he said slowly, "who I am, and by what right I intrude myself into this room? You have presumption, you, M. Anthony Bidaud's guest, to use the word 'intrude' to me! I am this dead gentleman's brother. My name is Gilbert Bidaud. Eh? Did you speak?"



CHAPTER VII.

So many conflicting emotions had been pressed into the last few minutes that Basil was utterly bewildered. The cold, sardonic face before him, wreathed into mocking smiles even in the presence of death, added to his bewilderment. He passed his hand across his eyes, wondering whether he was dreaming, but removing his hand from his forehead he saw the dead form of Anthony Bidaud on the sofa, and heard the light laugh of the man who called himself Anthony's brother. This laugh recalled him to himself; he was in full possession of his senses, and understood what had occurred, and to some extent what it portended.

Gilbert Bidaud! And the woman with him was not his wife, but his sister, to whom Annette's father had written six months ago, imploring her to come to him, and promising to provide for her and her family. That

being so, she was here by authority. She was but an instrument in the hands of Gilbert Bidaud, whose lightest word she was constrained to obey.

Gilbert Bidaud !

“ It is hard to speak harshly of one’s flesh and blood, but it is the truth that the girl I loved was fortunate in not placing her affections upon him. He would have broken her heart. He was a spendthrift and a libertine, and would stop at little for the gratification of his selfish pleasures.”

It was but last evening that these words were spoken by lips that would never speak again, and now this spendthrift and libertine was within touch of him, was standing with a smiling face by the dead body of the brother he would have wronged. There came to Basil’s mind the image of Annette, the sweet confiding girl, who was to have been given into his care to guard and protect. All that was over now. Inexorable death had stopped the fulfilment of the fond father’s wish. And Annette herself, how would it fare with her ? She was ignorant as yet of the crushing, terrible blow which had so suddenly fallen upon her. Who would

impart the cruel news to her? Who would comfort her in her bereavement? Even as these reflections crossed his mind he heard the young girl's voice singing outside as she tripped downstairs from her bedroom. He glided to the door, and softly turned the key. Just in time. Annette lingered at the door, tried the handle gently with the intention of kissing her father good morning, and, finding the door fast, passed on gaily and continued her song.

"That is Annette?" questioned Gilbert Bidaud. Basil nodded. "A sweet voice, the voice of a child, whose nature is not yet moulded. We will mould it, my sister and I. We will instil into her virgin soul, principles. She will be grateful that we have come, being of her blood. I have a number of your English sayings at my fingers' ends. Blood is thicker than water. I represent the one, you the other. She is not a woman—yet. The mind of a child is like a slate! fancies, likings, are easily rubbed off. It is more serious when we grow older. The child forgets, the woman remembers. Do you catch my meaning?"

"I should be sorry to say I did," replied Basil.

“Ah, you would pay me a compliment, gilding me with virtues to which I do not aspire, to which I have never aspired. I am a plain man, I; honest to the backbone; with my heart on my sleeve, transparent. It has not paid up to this time, but my hour has come. Why did you lock the door?”

“Does not that answer you?” pointing to the dead body of Annette’s father.

“Ah, she does not know. You are considerate, you.” A strange smile came to his lips as he added, “No one knows but you and I.”

Basil stepped to the table. Perhaps the letter which Anthony Bidaud intended to write to his lawyer was there; it might contain something by which he could be guided at this dread crisis. But the sheet of paper which Anthony Bidaud had taken from the open desk displayed only the mark of a scrawl at the top. The pen, with the ink scarcely dried in it, lay upon the table. Evidently at the very moment that Anthony Bidaud had put pen to paper he was visited by the death stroke. The pen had dropped from his fingers, and he had fallen back lifeless in his chair. There was, however, an addressed

envelope, and Basil noted the name and the direction, which were those of the lawyer whom Anthony Bidaud intended to summon to the plantation.

Gilbert Bidaud had followed his movements attentively, and now, when Basil looked up from the table, he repeated the last words he had uttered.

“No one knows but you and I.”

“What do you mean by that?” demanded Basil.

“What I mean,” said Gilbert Bidaud, touching his forehead with a finger, “I keep here for the present. It is sometimes dangerous to explain meanings too soon. Take heed. When I came to this colony—but a short time since—I was inwardly warned that I might meet with men from whom it would be necessary to protect myself. Therefore I purchased this”—producing a revolver—“and this”—producing a knife—“only to be used in self-defence, against you, against any man.”

There was nothing menacing in his tone. He spoke, indeed, rather playfully than otherwise, and handled the revolver and knife as though they were toys instead of dangerous

weapons. A wild thought crossed Basil's mind, and he acted upon it instantly.

"You say you are Gilbert Bidaud, brother of this unfortunate gentleman, but I have only your word for it."

"Ah, ah," said Gilbert Bidaud, with an air of great amusement, "you have only my word for it. But what kind of authority do you hold here that you should demand answers to questions upon this or any other subject?"

Basil could not answer this direct challenge; he inwardly recognised the weakness of his position; Anthony Bidaud dead, he was but a cipher on his estate.

"You are as a feather to a rock," said Gilbert Bidaud, with a gesture of contempt, "and I am but amusing myself with you. I stand quietly here for a reason I may presently explain. This house has lost a master." He glanced at his dead brother. "This house has gained a master." He touched his breast triumphantly. "It is but a change, a law of nature. My brother and I have not met for twenty years. He had a good motive for avoiding me; he fled from Switzerland with money of mine, and now, through death, he is compelled to make restitution."

"It is false," cried Basil, chivalrously defending the friend he had lost. "If you are Gilbert Bidaud it was you who attempted to rob him of his inheritance."

"Ah, ah. Did my estimable brother open his heart entirely to you?"

"Sufficiently to reveal your true character—even to the last words you spoke to him before he left Switzerland."

"Favour me with them. It may be excused if I do not faithfully recall them at this distance of time."

"‘One day,’ you said to him, ‘I will be even with you. Remember my words—dead or alive, I will be even with you.’"

"I remember. My words were prophetic. Fate was on my side, justice was on my side. They whispered to me, ‘Wait.’ I waited. And now—look there! So, so, my ingenious young friend; you know the whole story."

"It was related to me by your brother."

"By this lump of clay! It would be the act of a fool to deal tenderly by you; and I, as you may have already learned, am no fool. How came my brother by his death?"

"How came he by his death?" stammered

Basil, puzzled by the question, and not seeing the drift of it.

“Ay, how came he by his death? I am not so ignorant as you suppose. I have made inquiries about you; there are men on this estate who bear you no good will. You are here, not as a guest, but an interloper. You and my brother were strangers a few short weeks ago, and you forced yourself upon him and lived here, a beggar, eating his food, drinking his wine, and paying for them neither in service nor money. That is a creditable part to be played by one who calls himself an English gentleman. Summoned here by M. Anthony Bidaud—I have in my pocket the letter he wrote to our sister—I hasten on the wings of love, tarrying not on the road, but wearing myself near to death in order that I may satisfy his longing desire to embrace me. I meet you by accident on the river’s bank, and I perceive that you regard yourself as master here. The river is yours, the land is yours, my brother is yours, his daughter Annette is yours—ah, you wince at that. All this you proclaim in your lordly way, and patronise me—me, whose rightful place you would have usurped. Before meet-

ing me you pass my sister, resting in her labour of love, and you offer her charity—you, a beggar, pass this insult upon a lady who, under my direction, will educate my dear brother's little daughter, and teach her—principles. You leave me by the river; I, guileless, unsuspecting, a child in innocence, calmly take my bath, and reflect with delight upon the joy of my brother when he takes me to his arms. Walking to this house, I meet a labourer, whose name is Rocke. He tells me something of you; he directs me to my brother's private room. I open the door; I see you standing by my brother's side. You are in a state of fear and agitation; your face is white, your limbs tremble. I hear you ask the question, 'Can this be death?' To whom or to what do you address this inquiry? To your conscience, for you believe yourself to be alone; you are unconscious that I am present. 'Can this be death?' I convince myself, and you. It is death. I am deprived of the opportunity of saying to my brother that I forgive him for the wrong he did me in the past. It is most cruel, and you have robbed me of the opportunity; but, before I forget it, I will chance the efficacy of my

forgiveness, though he be dead." With a mock humility shocking to witness, he extended his hands, and, looking upwards, said, "Brother, I forgive you. I return to my argument. What passed between you and my brother before I entered this room? Again I ask, how came he by his death? If it is not a natural end, who is the murderer?"

In hot indignation Basil started forward, but by a great effort of will restrained himself. He had been appalled by the careless mocking tone in which Gilbert Bidaud had spoken, by his false assumption of a grief he did not feel, by the evident enjoyment he derived from the glaring insincerity of his professions. For no two things could be more distinctly at variance than Gilbert Bidaud's words and the tone in which he uttered them. It exhibited a refinement of malice, and, what rendered it more revolting, of malice in which the intellectual quality was conspicuous.

"It is well," continued Gilbert Bidaud, "that you exercise self-control. I might call aloud for help; I might, in less time than it takes me to speak it, create in this room the evidences of a struggle, in the course of which I might fire my revolver, produced for self-

defence; I might inform those who would break the door down—it is locked by you, remember—that you attempted to murder me, even as you—— Ah, I perceive you understand. Yes, all this I might do, and you would be in the toils. Do not move until I have done with you, or you will be in deadly danger. In such parts of the world as this, exasperated men often proceed hastily to summary justice, and it might be executed upon you. I am teaching you lessons, as I shall teach my dear niece Annette, principles. You are young; I, alas, am old. I have nothing to learn; you have much. Tell me, you hanger-on in this house, you beggar of my brother's hospitality, what passed between you and him before I entered this room?"

"Nothing," replied Basil, confounded by the possibilities of a ruthless malice with which Gilbert Bidaud had threatened him. "I have already informed you that when I entered the room he was dead."

"What brought you here?"

"I came by appointment," said Basil. He no longer doubted that the man before him was Anthony Bidaud's brother, and he was

surprised that he had not detected the resemblance upon his first meeting with Gilbert.

“What was the nature of the appointment?”

“He wished me to read a letter he intended to write to his lawyer.”

“Ah, ah! He intended to write to his lawyer. May I ask this lawyer’s name?”

“It is there upon an envelope.”

“His place of residence?”

“Sydney, I believe.”

“A long way off. The letter was to have been written this morning?”

“Yes. He at first intended to write it last night, but he put it off till to-day. The postponement was most unfortunate.”

“To you?”

“To me. I should have urged him to carry out his intention last night, as he designed.”

“Ah! *Après dommage chacun est sage*—except the dead. Why should you have urged him?”

“It would have been to my interests—and his, I fear.”

“Leave his out of the question; he has done with the world. Yours is another

matter. How could a simple letter to a lawyer have been in your interests? A letter is not a legal document." His preternatural sharpness as he made this remark was a revelation to an honest nature like Basil's. There seemed to be no limit to Gilbert Bidaud's cunning.

"At least it would have explained matters, and cleared me from your suspicions."

"Words are easily spoken, and weigh no more than air. To what effect was to have been this letter?"

"He desired to make his will."

Gilbert Bidaud drew a deep breath of satisfaction; he had elicited something tangible, something which wonderfully strengthened his position. "Then there is no will, and the letter, which would have been valueless, was not written. Your expression of regret leads me to infer that the will was to have been in your favour."

"To a certain extent."

"False. He intended to repair the injustice from which I have so long suffered; his property would have been divided between me and the little Annette. It is too late for him to do that now; but I stand as

natural guardian to my niece. I am truly the master here ; the law will declare me so. Console yourself. You shall depart from this house a free man. You are not in danger. Bear witness to my magnanimity ; my brother died a natural death. I will testify it, to save you."

"That will not do," said Basil. "From what cause he died shall be proved by proper evidence."

"It shall. I, a doctor, will supply it."

"I reject your proof ; you are an interested party. It shall be independent evidence that shall establish the cause of death."

"So be it, young Daniel," said Gilbert Bidaud briskly. "Meanwhile, I release you from suspicion ; I, the gentleman you have insulted, believe you to be innocent. I go to seek my niece, to introduce myself to her, and to break to her the sad, the melancholy news. But before I go I give you notice of your discharge. For one week from this day you shall enjoy my hospitality, but for no longer, for not an hour longer. Accept it, beggar, or leave at once."

He paused at the door, opened it, removed the key to the outside, and with a con-

temptuous motion, ordered Basil to quit the room. The young man had no choice but to obey. Whatever might be Gilbert Bidaud's character, he stood in the house as legal representative of the dead. Annette was but a child, and her uncle was her lawful guardian. Grieved, sorrow-stricken, and humiliated, Basil left the room, and heard Gilbert Bidaud turn the key.



CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT should he do now, how should he act? To accept Gilbert Bidaud's hospitality was impossible. The old man was his bitter enemy, and would show him no consideration. Indeed, what consideration could he expect? There was no denying that he had no right to remain on the estate, but he felt he could not leave it for ever without seeing Annette once more, without speaking to her perhaps for the last time. Nor could he well take his final departure without making an attempt to clear himself from the foul suspicions which, in his absence, he felt convinced Gilbert Bidaud would set in circulation against him. He had led a spotless life, and the thought that a stain should now be cast upon it was unbearable. But what means could he take to clear himself from the breath of slander? He could think of no way at present, and he walked into the open with a heavy weight of melancholy at his heart.

He wandered into the woods and gathered some fruit; he had a vigorous appetite, and it would be folly to starve himself. But the food of which he partook had never tasted less sweet than on this sad morning. His hunger appeased, he returned to the vicinity of the house.

He heard a cry of distress in the distance, and saw men and women hurrying to the spot from which the cry proceeded. The voice was Annette's.

Presently he saw the men and women coming towards the house. They were headed by Gilbert Bidaud and his sister, and one of the men—before the group came close to him he saw that it was Rocke—was carrying in his arms the insensible form of Annette. Impelled by love and infinite compassion for the child, he started forward, but was haughtily waved off by Gilbert Bidaud.

“That man,” said Gilbert to those in his rear, “has my permission to remain on this estate for one week. When that time has expired he will be a trespasser.”

As he finished speaking Annette opened her eyes—they fell upon Basil.

“Basil, Basil!” she cried, extending her arms to him.

“Annette!”

Once more he attempted to go to her; once more Gilbert Bidaud waved him off, and stepped before him.

“If he touches her, if he follows her, arrest him. I give you authority.”

Basil fell back. Annette’s mournful eyes were fixed upon his face in dumb despair.

“Hurry in—hurry in,” said Gilbert Bidaud in a harsh tone.

They passed into the house, and Basil was left alone. It was a favourite trick of his to put his thoughts into unspoken words; he had encouraged the habit, finding it led to clearness, and generally, when he was in doubt, to some definite issue. In his disturbed mood he found this a suitable time for this mental indulgence. Something should be done, clearly; but what?

“Poor Annette!” he thought. “Poor child! What will now become of her? What will be her future? That brute—he is no less—who boasts so sardonically that he intends to teach her principles, will poison her mind against me. If I do not see her again

she will grow to hate me. It is dreadful to think of. She has none but kind thoughts of me now; and though in a short time we may be parted for ever, and all chance of ever seeing her again will be lost, I should dearly like to feel that if she thinks of me in the future it will be with gentleness and affection. I have done nothing to forfeit her affection, except that I am unfortunate.

“My bright dreams are suddenly snapped. A few short hours have changed happiness to woe. Still—still I have committed no wrong. Of that I am sure, and it is a comfort—but poor Annette! If I could assure her that I am not to blame, I could bear it. She would believe me, and I could go on my way with a less sorrowful heart.

“That brute will try his hardest to prevent my seeing her. The blow that has fallen upon her may prostrate her. She may die—it is horrible, horrible! If that should happen, Gilbert Bidaud will come into possession of everything. Is that the end to which he will work? He is capable of it, capable of any villainy. Can I do nothing to save her?

“I am powerless. I have no claim upon her; I have no right to be here. But I will

not go away without seeing, without speaking to her. If he takes her from this place, which is likely enough, I will follow them. She must not, she must not be left to the tender mercies of that jackal.

“All very fine to talk, Basil. You will follow them? Why, man, you must live. It is a necessity. And to live you must work. How much money have you in your pocket to commence the fight of existence with?—to say nothing of the grand things you are going to do for sweet Annette.

“She has got hold of my heart-strings. I shall never, never forget her. Certain words spoken by my dear friend, Anthony Bidaud, last night, come to my mind. Let me recall them, exactly as he spoke them.

“‘We are drawn to each other,’ he said. And before that: ‘By accident you enter into our lives. I use the term accident, but I believe it to be a providence.’ How if it should be so? The shadow of death was hanging over him, and at such times some men have been gifted with prophetic insight. If it were so with Anthony Bidaud, this is not the end. The thought I have expressed, the very word ‘insight’ I have used, were

his. 'I have observed you closely,' he said, 'and am satisfied to deliver into your hands a sacred charge, the charge of a young girl's future. At such moments as these there comes to some men a subtle, unfathomable insight. It comes to me. I firmly believe that there is a link between you and my child which, if you do not recognise it now, you will be bound to recognise in the future. It may be broken in the present, but the threads will be joined as surely as we stand here side by side.'

"With all my heart I hope so, but it is the wildest, the most unreasonable of hopes.

"Can nothing, nothing be done?

"He said he had made no will; but he may have left papers expressing his wishes. How to get a sight of them? If I had sufficient means to take me to Sydney I would hasten there, to Anthony Bidaud's lawyer, and lay the case before him. But my purse is empty. I have, however, something about me of value. My gold watch and chain, given to me by my dear father. That is worth a certain sum, but it would not carry me to Sydney. It would carry me, however, to Gum Flat, where perhaps I can find a lawyer who will advise

her. In the saddle I could reach there to-night, and be back to-morrow. Where can I obtain a horse? I dare not take one from the plantation. Gilbert Bidaud would accuse me of theft, and he would be within his right. Ah! Old Corrie!"

Here he stopped. His unspoken thoughts had led him to a definite issue.

Gum Flat was the name of the nearest township, if township it could be called. In the Australian colonies they delight in singular names for places. Old Corrie was a man who, by permission of Anthony Bidaud, occupied a hut which he had built with his own hands on the plantation, some two miles from the spot upon which Basil at that moment stood. He was not employed on the estate, but did odd jobs in wood splitting and the felling of trees for the master of the plantation. The man had "taken" to Basil, as the saying is, and in his odd way had shown a liking for the young man, who always had a pleasant word for any agreeable person he chanced to fall across.

Old Corrie was not an old man, his age being about forty, but he was dubbed Old Corrie because he was angular, because he

was crooked, because he had a mouth all awry, because he chose to keep himself from his fellows. He owned a horse, and it occurred to Basil that he might lend it to him for the journey to Gum Flat, which was distant some forty-five miles. To Old Corrie's hut, therefore, Basil betook himself, stepping out with a will.

In less than half-an-hour he reached the old fellow's dwelling. Old Corrie was not at home, but Basil heard the sound of his axe in the woods. It was not very near, but men's ears get trained to fine sounds in the bush. Guided by the thud of the axe Basil in a short time found himself face to face with the woodman.

Old Corrie went on with his work, merely glancing up and giving Basil a friendly nod. From another living creature Basil received a more boisterous greeting, a laughing jackass which Old Corrie had tamed bursting into an outrageous fit of laughter without the least apparent cause. This bird, which is sometimes called the bushman's clock, was an uncouth-looking object, as big as a crow, of a rich chestnut-brown colour with light-blue wings ; its beak was long and pointed, and its mouth

inordinately large. These characteristics, in alliance with a formidable crest, invested it with a ferocious air ; but this particular specimen was exceedingly gentle despite the extravagant sounds it emitted, which might have been excruciatingly prolonged had not its sharp eye caught sight of a carpet snake wriggling through the underwood. Down darted the laughing jackass, and commenced a battle with the snake which terminated in the bird throwing the dead body of the reptile into the air, with a series of triumphant chuckles ; after which it sat silent on a branch, contemplating the dead snake with an air partly comical, partly profound, and waiting in grim patience for a movement on the part of its victim which would furnish an excuse for a renewal of hostilities.

Basil had time to note all this, for Old Corrie did not speak, and the young man was debating how to commence.

“ Well, Master Basil,” said Old Corrie, presently, throwing down his axe and taking out his pipe, a common short clay which he would not have exchanged for thrice its weight in gold, “ what brings you this way ? Any message from Mr. Bidaud ? ”

"No, Corrie," replied Basil sadly, "you will receive no more messages from him."

"I was thinking myself," said Corrie, glancing at Basil, and not immediately recognising the gravity of the reply, "that there mightn't be many more."

"What made you think that?" asked Basil, in doubt whether the man knew of Anthony Bidaud's death.

"I'm down with the fever, Master Basil."

"I am sorry to hear that, Corrie," said Basil in surprise, for Old Corrie was the picture of health and strength. "Can I do anything for you?"

"No, Master Basil," said Old Corrie, with a smile and a kindly look at Basil. "The fever I'm down with ain't the kind of fever that's in your mind. It's the gold fever I'm down with."

"Oh," said Basil, "I understand."

"The wonder is that I've never been down with it before. If I don't strike a rich claim or find a big nugget or two, I can always come back to this."

"Have you heard any news, then?"

"Well, two men camped out here last night, and we had a talk. I gave 'em some

tea, and their tongues got loosened a bit. There's a new gold-field discovered somewhere in the north, and they're after it. A regular Tom Tiddler's ground, Mr. Basil, only it's all gold and no silver. Twenty ounces to the tub."

"And you're off?"

"When I've finished this job for Mr. Bidaud."

"How long will that take you?"

"About three weeks."

"Is it a contract job?"

"Yes."

"Signed on paper?"

"No, we never had need of that. Mr. Bidaud's word is as good as his bond; so's mine."

"I would not go on with it, Corrie, if I were you, till I made sure."

"Why?"

"Because the gentleman who made the contract with you by word of mouth is dead."

"Dead!"

"Died this morning suddenly, I grieve to say."

Old Corrie took his pipe from his mouth,

and sent a look of reproach in the direction of the laughing jackass, from whose throat proceeded a faint gurgle of laughter. At this look the quaint bird—as odd a specimen of the feathered tribes as Old Corrie was of the human race—checked its mirth, and cocking its head knowingly on one side, inquired with its speaking eye what was the matter.

“That’s bad news, Master Basil.”

“The worst of news, Corrie.”

“Died suddenly?”

“Quite suddenly. It is a great shock.”

“What’s to become of the little lady?” asked Old Corrie, in a sympathising tone. The inquiry was addressed as much to himself as to Basil.

“That is one of the things that are troubling me, Corrie. You are a favourite of hers.”

“I’ve seen her grow up, and remember her mother well. I’ve cause. Once when I was down with the colonial fever—almost as bad as the gold fever, Master Basil—Mrs. Bidaud as good as nursed me through it, coming or sending every day for two months and more, till I got strong. When I was well I went up to the house to thank her. The little lady was just toddling about, and made friends

with me. I shall never forget Mrs. Bidaud ; I went to her funeral. You stopped at my hut before you came here, I expect."

" Yes ; I thought you might be there."

" Did you hear anything ? "

" Only the sound of your axe in the woods."

" I mean inside the hut. There's a magpie there that's got the sense of a human being and a voice like a flute. I only got it a fortnight ago, and I've tamed it already, surprising. Back as white as snow, Master Basil, and breast and wings shining like black satin. A handsome bird, and quite young. It says ' Little lady ; Little lady ! ' and ' Miss Annette ! ' in a way that'll astonish you. I'm doing it for the little lady herself, and I'm glad I began it because I'm going away."

" It will please her greatly, Corrie, if she is allowed to accept it."

" What's to prevent her ? Poor little lady ! First her mother, then her father. I thought there was trouble in your face when I saw it. Would you mind explaining, Master Basil, about this wood-splitting contract of mine ? Why shouldn't I finish it till I made sure."

Then Basil told of the arrival of the dead

man's brother and sister, and was not delicate in expressing his opinion of Gilbert Bidaud.

"You're not the sort of man," said Old Corrie thoughtfully, "to speak ill behind another's back without good reason. Little lady's uncle must be a bad lot. A man and a woman, you say, foreign looking. They must be the pair that passed my hut early this morning when I was getting up. They didn't stop; she wanted to, I think, but he wouldn't let her. 'Curse you!' I heard him say, 'What are you lagging for? Put life into your miserable limbs; we haven't got far to go.' It seemed to me as if he laid hands on her to drag her along. I came out of the hut, and saw them ahead, the woman walking as if she was dead beat, and the man lugging her on. They never turned to look behind, and I watched till they were out of sight. I'm sorry for the little lady. I'll go up to the house to-day, and judge for myself."

"You may hear something against me, Corrie. Don't believe it."

"I won't, without reason. I make up my mind slow, Master Basil. Perhaps you've got something more to tell me. It won't be thrown away."

Wishing to stand well with Old Corrie, Basil became more communicative, and put the woodman in possession of the particulars of what had passed between himself and Anthony Bidaud on the previous evening, and also of his interviews with Anthony's brother.

"It looks black," said Old Corrie. "It's a pity you didn't leave him to the alligator. And now, Master Basil, you've something else in your mind. Out with it."

"I came to ask you to do me a great service."

"Give it mouth."

"It may be that poor Annette's father has left some papers with respect to her future which the law might declare valid. If that is so, and her uncle finds them, he will destroy them; it may be to his interest to do so, and in that case he will allow no considerations of right and wrong to stand in his way. The presence of a lawyer may prevent this. Then there is the slanderous talk he is sure to set going against me; I want to clear myself of it. The precise cause of Anthony Bidaud's death should be ascertained and declared by a competent and disinterested person, and I

thought of going to Gum Flat and enlisting the services of a lawyer and a doctor, whom I would bring back with me."

"It would be a proper thing to do," said Corrie.

"But I am in a difficulty. I could walk the distance, but I could not get there till to-morrow. Coming and going, four days at least would be wasted, and in that time Annette's uncle could work his own ends without interruption. Now, if I had a horse I could get there this evening, and back to-morrow."

"You want me to lend you my mare?"

"That is what I came to ask you."

"You can have her; she's a willing creature, and 'll go till she drops."

"It is kind of you, Corrie."

"Not at all. I do it a little bit for your sake, but a good deal more for the sake of the little lady."

"You run a risk, Corrie. My story may not be true; I may never come back."

"I'll take security, then."

"I have no money. The only thing I possess of value is this watch and chain."

"I won't take that; you may need it to

pay the lawyer and the doctor with. Besides that isn't the security I mean. I'll take your word."

"You're a real good fellow, Corrie. Some day I may be able to repay you."

"If I had any idea of looking out for that day I shouldn't do what I'm doing. Look here, Master Basil. I know a gentleman when I see one; and you're a gentleman. I believe every word you've told me. This fellow that's turned up, the little lady's uncle, is a scoundrel, or he wouldn't have spoken the words I heard to a woman nearly dead with fatigue—his own sister, too. Come along; let's saddle the mare."

Before that was done, however, Old Corrie insisted that Basil should eat a hearty meal and see the magpie he was taming for Annette. Then Basil mounted the willing mare, and with a grip of the hand and a hearty "Good luck, mate," from Old Corrie, the young man started for Gum Flat.

CHAPTER IX.

It was three months since Basil had passed through the conglomeration of canvas tents and stores which rejoiced in a title which certainly could not be called euphonious, and then, although those were its most prosperous days, it had struck him as being a wretched hole. Rumours of rich finds of gold had originally attracted a population to Gum Flat township, but the glowing anticipations of the gold-diggers who flocked to the false El Dorado were doomed to disappointment. It was not a gold-diggers' but a storekeepers' rush, and the result was a foregone conclusion ; after a time the miners who had flocked thither began to desert the place. Not, however, before they gave it a fair trial. They marked out claims, they prospected the hills and gullies, they turned the waters of a large creek, they sank shafts in many a likely-looking spot, they followed spurs of stones on the

ranges in the hope that they would lead them to a rich quartz reef, but their labours were unrewarded. A couple of specks to the dish and the faintest traces of gold in the quartz were not sufficient to pay for powder and tobacco, and the men gradually began to leave the uninviting locality. A few remained, but not to dig for gold; these were chiefly loafers, and lived on each other, playing billiards during the day on the one billiard table that had been left behind, and cards during the night, for fabulous and visionary sums of money which, really lost and won, would have transformed beggars into millionaires and millionaires into beggars. The poorer they grew the larger the stakes they played for, and their delusions created for their delectation the most delicious paroxysms of infinite joy and overwhelming despair. These they enjoyed to the full, reckoning up their loses and gains with wild eyes and radiant countenances. One beggarly loafer, who for the last five years had not had five pounds to bless himself with, went to the creek one dark night after a visionary loss of a hundred thousand pounds or so, and insisted upon drowning himself.

It required a vast amount of insistence on his part, for the creek just then was not more than three feet deep. Anyway, he was found dead the next morning, with a letter in his pocket to the effect that he was financially ruined and could not survive the disgrace; whereupon his principal creditor, who, in the matter of finances, was no better off than the drowned man, perambulated High Street in a state of fury, fiercely denouncing his debtor who had not the courage to live and pay his debts of honour.

Some means of subsistence, however inadequate, Gum Flat must have had; these were found in the persons of a half-a-dozen drivers of bullock drays, who every two weeks brought their earnings there and spent them royally. This process lasted on each occasion exactly three days, during which time the population, numbering in all not more than thirty souls, were in clover. When the bullock drivers returned to their avocations the loafers declared that the colonies were going to the dogs, and resumed the routine of their dismal days, gambling, drinking, quarrelling, until the six solvent men returned again to gladden their hearts.

Even this miserable state of affairs came to an end after a time, and reached a more deplorable stage. The bullock drivers discovered more agreeable quarters, and in their turn deserted the township. Driven by sheer necessity the loafers, one by one, followed their example, and slunk from the place, until only four remained. Such was the condition of Gum Flat as Basil rode towards the township on a day eventful enough in the story of his life, but scarcely less eventful than the night which followed it was destined to be. Had he been aware of this he would have thought twice before he made up his mind to proceed thither in search of lawyer and doctor; but such is the irony of circumstances that, had he not set forth on his present journey, the entire course of his future life would have drifted into channels which would, almost to a certainty, have separated him from Annette for ever. Accident or fate, which you will; but the course of many lives is thus determined.

He rode all day through the tracks he remembered, and concerning which he had been refreshed by Old Corrie, who was as ignorant as himself of the deplorable change

that had taken place. The road for a few miles lay along great plains of rich black soil, dotted here and there with masses of blue and barley grass, among which might be found the native leek and wild cucumber; then followed a tract of country somewhat lightly timbered but heavily grassed, where he came across a nasty bit of "devil devil" land, fortunately of not great extent, for he had to ride with a loose rein and leave it to his horse to pick the safest way. On his left were large lagoons in which a wondrous variety of wild fowl abounded; on his right was a belt of impenetrable scrub; but the track was well defined, and after riding twenty miles he entered a thickly wooded forest, for the shade of which he was grateful, the sun now being high in the heavens. Emerging from this forest he halted near a vast sheet of water, in which tall reeds grew, and where he found the wild banana. Off this fruit and some cold meat and bread which old Corrie had forced upon him, he made a sufficient meal, and then resumed his journey. In the afternoon the road lay through a more even country, and he reckoned upon reaching Gum Flat before sun-

down. But he reckoned without his host, for the distance was longer than he calculated, and at sunset he was still, according to the information given to him by the driver of a bullock dray, eight or ten miles from the township. This man was the only human being he had met in his lonely ride. Many a time in the course of the day had he fallen into contemplation of the pregnant events of the last twenty-four hours, thinking, "This time yesterday I was walking with Annette in the woods, gathering wildflowers for her mother's grave. She slipped, and I caught her in my arms." And again: "This time yesterday Anthony Bidaud, Annette, and I, were sitting in the verandah, watching the sunset; and a moment afterwards white stars were glittering in the clouds of faded gold. How peaceful, how happy we were! And now?" He shuddered as he thought of the dead form of Anthony Bidaud lying in his room and of the sense of desolation which must have fallen upon Annette. He strove to direct his thoughts into more cheerful grooves, but he was not successful.

The gorgeous colours in the heavens melted away; the sun dipped beneath the horizon;

it was night. Fortunately it was light, and he could see the road he was riding over. The willing animal he bestrode plodded on, more slowly now, and Basil did not attempt to quicken the pace. It was ten o'clock when he reached the township of Gum Flat.

He recognised it by the outlines of the tents. He had expected to see lights in the dwellings, arguing that Gum Flat must have increased in importance since his last visit, but all was dark on the outskirts. He was surprised at the darkness, but grateful that his journey was over. He rode along the High Street, and with still deeper surprise observed that on some of the stores the canvas lay loose, and that the calico over the frame was torn and rent. "Can I have mistaken the road?" he thought. In the middle of the High Street he paused. The door of a store was thrown suddenly open, and three men, whose movements had been inspired by the sound of the horse's hoofs, emerged therefrom, and stood looking up at Basil. Each had cards in his hand, denoting that when they were disturbed they had been gambling. The picture at that moment was Rembrandt-*esque*. The street was in darkness; not a

light was visible. One of the men standing at the door held above his head a lighted candle stuck in a whisky bottle, and this dim light enabled the three gamblers and Basil not exactly to see each other but to define outlines. Through the open door Basil saw a table upon which was another candle, and sitting at which was another man, also with cards in his hand. This man, leaning forward, was striving to pierce the gloom in which his companions and Basil stood. He rose and joined them, and going close to Basil, laid his hand upon the horse's neck. Thus, Basil and he confronted each other. And at that moment was commenced the weaving of a strand which was to connect the lives of these two men, for weal or woe.



CHAPTER X.

EACH man of this small group represented in his own person the epitome of a drama more or less stirring and eventful. With three of these we have little to do, and no good purpose will be served by recounting their antecedents. The history of the fourth—he who stood with his hand on the neck of old Corrie's horse, looking up at Basil—will presently be unfolded.

He was a full-bearded man, the light-brown hair so effectually concealing his features that only his cheekbones and forehead were visible. To a physiologist, therefore, the index was imperfect. He was a young man, of about the same age as Basil, and his name was Newman Chaytor. This was his true name; it will be as well to say as much, for there was much that was false about him.

The man who held the candle was known as Jim the Hatter; Jim belonged properly to

him by right, the Hatter was a patronymic he had earned by working on various goldfields alone, without a mate. Why they call men on the gold-diggings thus inclined, Hatters, is one of the mysteries, but it is a fact. Of the other two it will be sufficient to refer to them as Nonentity Number One and Nonentity Number Two. Jim the Hatter was a large-boned, loose limbed man, of great strength. Upon his first arrival in Australia his time, to put it gently, was not his own; it belonged to his country. He was now free, but his morals had not been improved by the lesson his country had administered to him.

It will thus be seen that Basil had unfortunately fallen among thieves.

For a few moments the man on horseback and the men on foot preserved silence, and opportunity was afforded for a striking picture. Jim the Hatter was the first to speak.

“Well, mate?” he said.

“Is this the township of Gum Flat?” inquired Basil.

“It is. If you’re looking for it, you’re dead on the gutter.”

"I thought I must have mistaken my way," said Basil. "What has come over the place?"

Newman Chaytor answered him. "It has gone," he said, "to the dogs."

"Like yourselves," thought Basil, gazing at the men, but deeming it prudent not to express himself aloud upon a point so personal. He spoke, however. "It is the place I was making for. I suppose I can put up here for the night?"

"There's nothing to prevent you. Gum Flat township just now is Liberty Hall."

"Stop a bit, stop a bit," said Nonentity Number One, considering it necessary to his dignity that he should take part in the conference. "Is the gentleman prepared to pay for accommodation?"

"That's a proper question," said Nonentity Number Two, thus asserting himself.

"Of course he is," said Jim the Hatter, answering for Basil, who, with an empty purse, was saved from awkwardness.

A diversion occurred here. Newman Chaytor snatched the candle from Jim the Hatter, in order that he might obtain a clearer view of Basil.

“Manners, mate,” said Jim the Hatter.

“Manners be hanged !” retorted Newman Chaytor, holding the candle high. “They’re out of stock.”

This was evident. To smooth matters Basil volunteered an explanation. “I have come here upon business, but I am afraid I have lost my time.”

“Perhaps not,” said Jim the Hatter. “We’re all business men here ; ready at a moment’s notice to turn a honest penny. That’s true, ain’t it, mate ? ”

He addressed Newman Chaytor, but that worthy did not reply. Having obtained a clearer view of Basil’s face, he seemed to be suddenly struck dumb, and stared at it as though he were fascinated.

“Still,” continued Jim the Hatter, “it’s as well to be particular in these times. I’m very choice in the company I keep, and I don’t as a rule do business with strangers, unless,” he added, with a grin which found its reflection on the lips of Nonentities Numbers One and Two, “they pay their footing first.”

“If you wish to know my name,” said Basil, “it is Basil Whittingham.”

“What !” cried Newman Chaytor, finding his tongue ; but the exclamation of undoubted astonishment appeared to be forced from him instead of being voluntarily uttered.

“Basil Whittingham,” repeated Basil. “Being here, I must stop for the night. Is there a stable near ?”

“There’s one at the back,” said Newman Chaytor, with sudden alacrity, “or rather there was one. I’ll show you.”

“Thank you,” said Basil, and followed his guide to the rear of the shanty.

The three men looked after them with no good will.

“He’s a swell,” said Nonentity Number One.

“He’s got a watch and chain,” said Nonentity Number Two.

“And a horse,” said Jim the Hatter.

Then they re-entered the store, and settled down to their game of cards.

“Stop here a moment,” said Newman Chaytor to Basil. “I’ll get a light.”

Returning with a candle stuck in a bottle, the fashionable form of candlestick in Gum Flat, he waved it about, sometimes so close to Basil that it shone upon his features.

“You stare at me,” said Basil, “as if you knew me.”

“Never saw you before to my knowledge.” (A falsehood, but that is a detail.) “You’re not a colonial.”

“I am an Englishman, like yourself, I judge.”

“Yes, I am English.”

“You have the advantage of me—you know my name. May I ask yours?”

“Certainly,” said Chaytor, but he spoke, nevertheless, with a certain hesitation, as if something of importance hung upon it. “My name is Newman, with Chaytor tacked to it.” Then, anxiously, “Have you heard it before?”

“Never. This is a tumble-down place. It is a courtesy to call it a stable.”

“It will serve, in place of a better.”

“Oh, yes, it is better than nothing.”

“Everything is tumble-down in Gum Flat. I am an Englishman, town-bred. And you?”

“My people hail from Devonshire.”

“I am not dreaming, then,” said Chaytor, speaking for the second time involuntarily.

“Dreaming!” exclaimed Basil.

“I was thinking of another matter,” said Chaytor, with readiness. “Speaking my thoughts aloud is one of my bad tricks.”

“One of mine, too,” said Basil, smiling.

“That is not the only thing in which we’re alike.”

“No.”

“We are about the same age, about the same build, and we are both gentlemen. Your horse is blown ; you have ridden a long distance.”

“From Bidaud’s plantation.”

“I have heard of it. And you come upon business? I may be able to assist you.”

“I shall be glad of assistance,” said Basil, recognising in his companion an obvious superiority to the men they had left. “When I passed through Gum Flat a few months ago I thought it a township likely to thrive, and now I find it pretty well deserted.

“It has gone to the dogs, as I told you. There’s nothing but grass for your horse to nibble at. So you’re from Devonshire. Do your people live there still?”

He mixed up the subjects of his remarks in the oddest manner, and cast furtive glances

at Basil with a certain mental preoccupation which would have forced itself upon Basil's attention had he not been so occupied with his own special cares.

"There are none left," said Basil. "I am the only one remaining."

"The only one?"

"Well, I have an old uncle, but we are not exactly on amicable terms."

"You are better off than I am. I have no family left." He sighed pathetically. "I fancy I can lay my hands on a bundle of sweet hay."

"I should feel grateful."

"Don't leave the stable till I come back; I shan't be gone long."

He was absent ten minutes or so, and though he went straight about his errand, he was thinking of something very different. "It is the most wonderful thing in the world," ran his thoughts—"that I should meet him here again, in this hole, not changed in the slightest! It can't be accident; it was predestined, and I should be a self-confessed idiot if I did not take advantage of it. But how is it to be worked? His uncle is still alive. What did he say? 'We are not ex-

actly on amicable terms.' That is because he is proud. I am not. I should be a better nephew to the old fellow than this upstart. He is very old, in his second childhood most likely. This is the turning point of my life, and I will not throw away the chance. Just as I was at the bottom of the ladder, too. I'll climb to the top—I will, I will!" He raised his hand to the skies, as though registering an oath.

"There," he said, throwing down a bundle of hay which the horse immediately began to munch, "with a bucket of water your mare will do very well. I'll fetch it."

"You are very kind," said Basil, warming to Newman Chaytor.

"Not at all. *Noblesse oblige*." This was said with a grand air.

Basil held out his hand, and Chaytor pressed it effusively. Then, at Chaytor's request, Basil spoke of the errand upon which he was engaged, and being plied skilfully with questions, put his companion in possession of a great deal he wished to know, not only in relation to the affairs of Bidaud's plantation but his own personal history as well.

"It is curious," said Chaytor, "that we two should have met at such a time and in such a place. Who knows what may come of it? I am, strange to say, a bit of a doctor and a bit of a lawyer, and if you will accept my services I shall be glad to accompany you back to Bidaud's plantation."

"But why?" asked Basil, touched by the apparently unselfish offer. "I have no claim upon you."

"Except the claim that one gentleman has upon another—which should count for something. It always has with me."

"Upon my word I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't try. It is myself I am rendering a service to, not you. This deserted hole, and the association of those men"—jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the tent—"sicken me. Does there not come to some men a crisis in their lives which compels them to turn over a new leaf, as the saying is, to cut themselves away entirely from the past and commence life anew?"

"Yes," said Basil, struck by the application of this figure of speech to his own circumstances, "it has come to me."

“And to me. I intended to leave Gum Flat to-morrow, and I did not know in which direction. I felt like Robinson Crusoe on the desert island, without a friend, without a kindred soul to talk to, to associate with. If you will allow me to look upon you as a friend you will put me under a deep obligation. Should the brother of the poor gentleman who died so suddenly this morning—the father of that sweet young lady of whom you speak so tenderly—succeed in having things all his own way, you will be cast adrift, as I am. It is best to look things straight in the face, is it not?—even unpleasant things.”

“It is the most sensible course,” said Basil.

“Exactly. The most sensible course—and the most manly. Why should not you and I throw in our fortunes together? I am sure we should suit each other.”

“I can but thank you,” said Basil. “It is worth thinking over.”

“All right; there is plenty of time before us. Let us go into the store now. A word of warning first. The men inside are not to be trusted. I was thrown in their company against my will, and I felt that the associa-

tion was degrading to me. We can't pick and choose in this part of the world."

"Indeed we cannot. I will not forget your warning. To speak honestly, I am not in the mood or condition for society. I have had a hard day, and am dead beat."

"You would like to turn in," said Chaytor. "I can give you a shake-down, and for supper what remains of a tin of biscuits and a tin of sardines. There, don't say a word. The luck's on my side. Come along."

The Nonentities and Jim the Hatter were in the midst of a wrangle when they entered, and scarcely noticed them. This left Chaytor free to attend to Basil. He placed before him the biscuits and sardines, and produced a flask of brandy. Basil was grateful for the refreshment; he was thoroughly exhausted, and it renewed his strength and revived his drooping spirits. Then he filled his pipe, and conversed in low tones with his new friend, while the gamblers continued their game.

"If I stop up much longer," said Basil, when he had had his smoke, "I shall drop off my seat."

Chaytor rose and preceded him to the further end of the store. The building, if

such a designation may be allowed to an erection composed of only wood and canvas, had been the most pretentious and imposing in the palmy days of the township, and although now it was all tattered and torn, like the man in the nursery rhyme, it could still boast of half a dozen private compartments in which sleepers could find repose and solitude. The walls of course were of calico, and for complete privacy darkness was necessary.

Chaytor and the three gamblers who were bending over their cards in the dim light of the larger space without, each occupied one of these sleeping compartments. Two remained vacant, and into one of these Chaytor led Basil.

There was a stretcher in the room, a piece of strong canvas nailed upon four pieces of batten driven into the ground. The canvas was bare ; there were no bedclothes.

“I have two blankets,” said Chaytor, “I can spare you one.”

Basil was too tired to protest. Dressed as he was he threw himself upon the stretcher, drew the blanket over him, and bidding his hospitable friend good night, and thanking

him again, was fast asleep almost as the words passed his lips.

Newman Chaytor stood for a moment or two gazing upon the sleeping man. "I can't be dreaming," he thought; "he is here before me, and I am wide awake. I drink to the future." He held no glass but he went through the pantomime of drinking out of one.

Taking the lighted candle with him he joined his mates, and left Basil sleeping calmly in darkness. They were no longer playing cards, but with heads close together were debating in whispers. Upon Chaytor's entrance they shifted their positions and ceased talking.

"Have you put your gentleman to bed?" asked Jim the Hatter, in a sneering tone in which a sinister ring might have been detected.

"Much obliged to you for the inquiry, replied Chaytor, prepared to fence; "he is sound asleep."

"Interesting child! A case of love at first sight, mates."

Nonentities Numbers One and Two nodded, with dark looks at Chaytor, who smiled genially at them and commenced to smoke.

“Or,” said Jim the Hatter, “perhaps an old acquaintance.”

“Take your choice,” observed Chaytor, who, in finesse and coolness, was a match for the three.

“Doesn’t it strike you, Newman, that it’s taking a liberty with us to feed and bolster him up, and stand drinks as well, without asking whether we was agreeable?”

“Not at all. The sardines were mine, the biscuits were mine, the grog was mine. If you want to quarrel say so.”

“I’m for peace and quietness,” said Jim the Hatter, threateningly. “I was only expressing my opinion.”

“And I mine. Look here, mates, I don’t want to behave shabbily, so I’ll tell you what is in my mind.”

“Ah, do,” said Jim the Hatter, with a secret sign to the Nonentities which Chaytor did not see; “then we shall know where we are.”

“I’ll tell you where we are, literally, mates. We’re in a heaven-forsaken township, running fast to bone, which leads to skeleton. Now I’m not prepared for that positive eventuality just yet. This world is good

enough for me at present, and I mean to do my best to enjoy it."

"Can't you enjoy it in our company?" asked Jim the Hatter.

"I think not," said Chaytor, with cool insolence. "The best of friends must part."

"Oh, that's your little game, is it?"

"That is my little game. I am growing grey. If I don't look out I shall be white before I'm thirty. Really I think it must be the effect of the company I have kept."

"We're not good enough for you, I suppose?"

"If you ask for my deliberate opinion I answer most distinctly not. No, mates, not by a long way good enough."

"Don't be stuck up, mate. Better men than you have had to eat humble pie."

"Any sort of pie," said Chaytor, philosophically, "is better than no pie at all. Take my advice. Bid good-bye to Gum Flat, gigantic fraud that it is, and go in search of big nuggets. That is what I am going to do."

"With your gentleman friend?"

"With my gentleman friend. We may as well part civilly, but if you choose the other

thing I am agreeable." The three men rose with the intention of retiring. They did not respond to his invitation to part friends. "Well, good-night, and good luck to you." They nodded surlily and entered their sleeping apartments, after exchanging a few words quietly between themselves.

Newman Chaytor helped himself to brandy from his flask, then filled his pipe, and began to smoke.

That he had something serious to think of was evident, and that he was puzzled what use to make of it was quite as clear. An enterprise was before him, and he was disposed to pledge himself to it; but he was in the dark as to what end it would lead him. In the dark, also, how it could be so conducted as to result in profit to himself. He was in desperately low water, and had lost confidence in himself. His ship was drifting anchorless on a waste of waters; suddenly an anchor had presented itself, which, while it would afford him peace and safety for a time, might show him a way to a golden harbour. An ugly smile wreathed his lips, the sinister aspect of which was hidden by his abundant hair; but it was there, and remained for

many musing moments. He took from his pocket a common memorandum book, and on a few blank pages he wrote the names, Newman Chaytor and Basil Whittingham, several times and in several different styles of handwriting. Then he wrote upon one, in the form of a cheque, "Pay to Newman Chaytor, Esq., the sum of forty thousand pounds. Basil Whittingham." He contemplated this valueless draft for a long time before destroying it at the candle's light, as he destroyed the other sheets of paper upon which he had written the signatures.

"All the pleasures of existence," he mused, "all the light, everything in the world worth having, are on the other side of the water. Was I born to grind out my days in a prison like this? No, and I will not. Here is the chance of escape"—he turned his head to the room in which Basil was sleeping—"with possibilities which may give me all I desire. It would be flying in the face of Providence to neglect it. The first law of nature is Self. I should be a born fool not to obey the first law of nature."

In these reflections he passed an hour, when he determined to go to bed.

All was still. He stepped on tiptoe to each of the four compartments occupied by Basil, Jim the Hatter, and the Nonentities, and listened at the doors to assure himself that he was the only wakeful person in the store. Deeming himself safe he entered his own room, and taking a small round mirror in a zinc frame from the top of a packing case which served as wash-stand and dressing-table, gazed at his face with strange intentness. Putting the hand mirror down he cast wary looks around. Yes, he was alone ; there were no witnesses. Then he did a curious thing. He took off his beard and whiskers.

In the room on his right lay Basil asleep ; in the room on his left was Jim the Hatter, whom he supposed to be. But in this he reckoned without his host, as many another sharp rogue has done in his time. Jim the Hatter, despite his deep breathing, which had deceived Newman Chaytor, was wide awake. The moment Chaytor entered his room Jim the Hatter had slipped noiselessly from his stretcher, and his face was now glued to the wall of calico through which the light of Chaytor's candle was shining.

There was a small slit in the calico, which enabled Jim the Hatter to see what was passing in Chaytor's room. Chaytor's back, however, was towards the wall through which he was peeping. The watcher was puzzled ; he could not exactly discover what it was that Chaytor had done.

Upon Chaytor's face, now beardless and whiskerless, there was a natural growth of hair in the shape of a moustache. This moustache was the precise colour of that which Basil grew and cherished. It was not so long, but a few weeks' growth would make the resemblance perfect, if such was Chaytor's wish. In other respects the resemblance between him and Basil was remarkable. Height, figure, complexion—even the colour of the eyes—all tallied.

In his anxiety to discover exactly what was going on, Jim the Hatter made a slight movement, which was heard by Chaytor. He turned suddenly, and the astonished watcher beheld the counterpart of Basil.

“By Jove!” he said inly ; “twins !”

Then, warned by Chaytor's attitude that he was in danger of himself being discovered, he slipped between his blankets as noiselessly as

he had slipped out of them. Waiting only to resume his disguise of beard and whiskers, Chaytor, candle in hand, went quietly but swiftly into the adjoining room and looked down upon the recumbent form of Jim the Hatter. Undoubtedly asleep, and sleeping like a top. Chaytor passed the candle across the man's face, who never so much as winked. Assured that there was no cause for alarm, Chaytor stepped backed to his own recess, put out the light, and went to bed.



CHAPTER XI.

LEAVING this schemer to his ill-earned repose, we strip the veil from his past and lay it bare.

Nature plays tricks, but seldom played a stranger than that of casting Newman Chaytor physically in the same mould as Basil. Born in different counties, with no tie of kinship between their families, their likeness to each other was so marvellous that any man seeing them for the first time side by side, without some such disguise as Chaytor wore on Gum Flat, and the second time apart, would have been puzzled to know which was which. But not less strange than this physical likeness was the contrast between their moral natures. One was the soul of guilelessness and honour, the other the soul of cunning and baseness. One walked the straight paths of life, the other chose the crooked.

Chaytor was born in London, and his parents occupied a respectable position. They gave him a good education, and did all they could to furnish him worthily for the battle of life. The affection they displayed was ill-requited. In his mother's eyes he was perfection, but his father's mind was often disturbed when he thought of the lad's future. Perhaps in his own nature there was a moral twist which caused him to doubt ; perhaps his own youth was distinguished by the vices he detected in his son. However that may be, he took no blame to himself, preferring rather to skim the surface than to seek discomfort in psychological depths.

The parents discussed their son's future.

"We will make a doctor of him," said the father.

"He will be a great physician," said the mother.

At this time Chaytor was eighteen years of age. At twenty it was decided that he was in the wrong groove ; at least, that was the statement of the doctor who had undertaken his professional education. It was not an entirely ingenuous statement ; the master was eager to get rid of

his pupil, whose sharp practices distressed him.

“What would you like to be?” asked his father.

“A lawyer,” replied Chaytor.

“He will be Lord Chancellor,” said his mother.

Thereupon Newman Chaytor was articled to a firm of lawyers in Bedford Row, London, W.C., an old and respectable firm, Messrs. Rivington, Sons, and Rivington, who kept its exceedingly lucrative business in the hands of its own family. It happened, fatefully, that this firm of lawyers transacted the affairs of Bartholomew Whittingham, Basil’s uncle, with whom our readers have already made acquaintance.

In the course of two or three years Chaytor’s character was fully developed. He was still the idol of his mother, whose heart was plated with so thick a shield of unreasoning love that nothing to her son’s disparagement could make an impression upon it. Only there were doors in this shield which she opened at the least sign from the reprobate, sheltering him there and cooing over him as none but such hearts can. Her husband had

the sincerest affection for her, and here was another safeguard for Chaytor.

The surroundings of life in a great and gay city are dangerous and tempting even to the innocent. How much more dangerous and tempting are they to those who by teaching or inclination are ripe for vice? It is not our intention to follow Chaytor through these devious paths; we shall simply touch lightly upon those circumstances of his career which are pertinent to our story. If for a brief space we are compelled to treat of some of the darker shadows of human nature, it must be set down to the undoubted fact that life is not made up entirely of sweetness and light.

Chaytor's father, looking through his bank book, discovered that he had a balance to his credit less by a hundred pounds than he knew was correct. He examined his returned cheques, and found one with his signature for the exact amount, a signature written by another hand than his. He informed his wife, pending his decision as to what steps to take to bring the guilt home. His wife informed her son.

"Ah," said he, "I have my suspicions."

And he mentioned the name of a clerk in his father's employ.

This ball being set rolling, the elder Chaytor began to watch the suspected man, setting traps for him, across which the innocent man stepped in safety. Mr. Chaytor was puzzled ; he had, by his wife's advice, kept the affair entirely secret, who in her turn had been prompted by her son to this course, and warned not to drag his name into it. The father, therefore was not aware that the accusation against the clerk proceeded from his son.

Chaytor had a design in view ; he wished to gain time to avoid possible unpleasant consequences.

Some three weeks afterwards, when Mr. Chaytor had resolved to take the forged cheque to the bank with the intention of enlisting its services in the discovery of the criminal, he went to his desk to obtain the document. It was gone, and other papers with it. He was confounded ; without the cheque he could do nothing.

“Have I a thief in my house,” he asked of himself, “as well as a forger at my elbow.”

The man he had suspected was in the habit

of coming to his private house once a week for clerking purposes. Without considering what he was laying himself open to, he accused his clerk of robbing him, and the result was that the man left his service and brought an action for slander against him, which he was compelled to compromise by an apology and the payment of a sum of money.

“It is father’s own fault,” said Chaytor to his mother; had he waited and watched, he would have brought the guilt home to the fellow. But don’t say anything more to him about it; let the matter rest.”

It did rest, but Mr. Chaytor did not forget it.

Being in pursuit of pleasure Chaytor found himself in continual need of money, and he raised and procured it in many discreditable ways, but still he managed to keep his secret. Then came another crime. Some valuable jewels belonging to his mother were stolen. By whom?

“By one of the female servants, of course,” said Chaytor.

He was not only without conscience, he was without heart.

Mr. Chaytor proposed to call in a detective. Mrs. Chaytor, acting upon the secret advice of her son, would not hear of it. The father had, therefore, two forces working against him, his wife, whom he could answer, because she was in the light, and his son, with whom he could not cope, because he was in the dark.

“It would be a dreadful scandal,” said young Chaytor to his mother. “If nothing is discovered—and thieves are very cunning, you know—we shall be in worse trouble than father got into with the clerk who forged his name to the cheque. We should be the laughing-stock of everyone who knows us, and should hardly be able to raise our heads.”

His word was law to her; he could twist her round his little finger, he often laughingly said to himself; and as she, in her turn, dominated her husband, the deceits he practised were not too difficult for him to safely compass. Every domestic in the house was discharged, and a new set engaged. When they sent for characters no answer was returned. Thus early in life young Chaytor was fruitful in mischief, but he cared not what occurred to others so long as he rode in safety.

One day an old gentleman paid a visit to Messrs. Rivington, Sons, and Rivington. This was Mr. Bartholomew Whittingham, Basil's uncle. He had come upon the business of his will, the particulars of which he had written down upon paper. He was not in the office longer than ten minutes, and he left at half-past one o'clock, the time at which Chaytor was in the habit of going to lunch. Following the old gentleman Chaytor saw him step into a cab, in which a young gentleman had been waiting. The young gentleman was Basil, and Chaytor was startled at the resemblance of this man to himself. Relinquishing his lunch, Chaytor jumped into a cab, and bade the driver follow Basil and his uncle. They stopped at Morley's Hotel, Charing Cross, and Chaytor had another opportunity of verifying the likeness between himself and Basil. It interested him and excited him. He had not the least idea what he could gain by it, but the fact took possession of his mind and he could not dislodge it. He ascertained the names of Basil and his uncle by looking over the hotel book, and when he returned to the office in Bedford Row the task was allotted to him of preparing

the rough draft of the will. Mr. Bartholomew Whittingham was very rich, and every shilling he possessed was devised to Basil, without restrictions of any kind.

“The old fellow must be worth forty thousand pounds,” mused Chaytor, and he rolled out the sum again and again. “For-ty thou-sand pounds! For-ty thou-sand pounds! For-ty thou-sand pounds! And every shilling is left to Mr. Basil Whittingham, my double. Yes, my Double! My own mother would mistake him for me, and his doddering old uncle would mistake me for him. What wouldn’t I give to change places with him! For-ty thou-sand pounds! For-ty thou-sand pounds! It’s maddening to think of. He has a moustache; I haven’t. But I can grow one exactly like. His hair is the colour of mine. I’ll keep my eye on him.”

It was an egregiously wicked idea, for by the wildest stretch of his imagination he could not see how this startling likeness could be worked to his advantage. Nevertheless he was fascinated by it, and he set himself the task of seeing as much of Basil as possible. During the week that Basil was living at Morley’s Hotel, Chaytor in his spare hours

shadowed him, without being detected. Basil never once set eyes on him, and as the young gentleman never entered the office of Messrs. Rivington, Sons, and Rivington, no one there had opportunity to note the resemblance between the men.

Chaytor for a week was in his element ; he ascertained from the hall porter in the hotel the places of amusement which Basil visited of an evening, and he followed him to them ; he waited outside the hotel to catch glimpses of him ; he studied every feature, every expression, every movement attentively, until he declared to himself that he knew him by heart. He began to let his moustache grow, and he practised little tricks of manners which he had observed. He was like a man possessed.

“ He is a gentleman,” he said. “ So am I. I am as good looking as he is any day of the week. Why shouldn’t I be, being his Double ? ”

He pondered over it, he dreamt of it, he worked himself almost into a fever concerning it. Distorted possibilities presented themselves, and monstrous views. The phantom image of Basil entered into his life, directed

his thoughts, coloured his future. He walked along the streets with this spectral Double by his side ; he leant over the river's bridges and saw it reflected in the water ; he felt its presence when he woke up in the dark night. One night during this feverish week, after being in the theatre which Basil visited, after sitting in the shadow of the pit and watching him for hours in a private box, after following him to Morley's Hotel and lingering so long in Trafalgar Square that he drew the attention of a policeman to his movements, he walked slowly homeward, twisting this and that possibility with an infatuation dangerous to his reason, until he came quite suddenly upon a house on fire. So engrossed was he that he had not noticed the hurrying people or their cries, and it was only when the blazing flames were before him that he was conscious of what was actually taking place. And there on the burning roof as he looked up he beheld the phantom Basil on fire. With glaring eyes he saw it with the flames devouring it, dwindling in proportions until its luminous outlines faded into nothingness, until it was gone out of the living world for ever. A deep sigh of satisfaction escaped him.

“Now he is gone,” he thought, “I will take his place. His uncle is an old man; I can easily deceive him; and perhaps even *he* will die before morning.”

In the midst of this ecstatic delirium a phantom hand was laid upon his shoulder, a phantom face, with a mocking smile upon it, confronted him. He struck at it with a muttered curse. It came to rob him of forty thousand pounds.

Had this mental condition lasted long he must have gone mad. The reason for this would have been that he had nothing to grapple with, nothing to fight, nothing but a shadow, which he had magnified into a mortal enemy who had done him a wrong which could only be atoned for by death. It was fortunate for him, although he deserved no good fortune, that Basil's residence at Morley's lasted but a week, and that he and his double did not meet again in the Old World; for although Basil passed much of his time in his father's house in London he lived at a long distance from Chaytor's usual haunts, and the young men's lives did not cross. Gradually Chaytor's reason reasserted itself, and he became sane. Grimly, des-

perately sane, with still the leading idea haunting him, it is true, but no longer attended by monstrous conceptions of what might occur in a day, in an hour, in a moment, and he on the spot ready to take advantage of it.

Shortly after Basil's departure he asked his mother if she ever had twins.

"What on earth do you mean, my dear?" she asked, laughing at him.

"It is plain enough," he answered incautiously. "I dream sometimes of a brother the exact counterpart of myself."

"You work too hard," said his mother, pityingly. "You must take a holiday, my darling."

"Who's to pay for it?" he asked gloomily.

"I am," she said fondly. "I have saved fifty pounds for you."

"Give it to me," he said eagerly, and with the money he went to Paris for a fortnight and squandered it on himself and his pleasures.

The foolish mother was continually doing this kind of thing, saving up money, wheedling her husband out of it upon false prettexts, stinting herself and making sacrifices for the worthless, ungrateful idol of her loving heart.

So time passed, and Chaytor was still in the office of Rivington, Sons, and Rivington, picking up no sound knowledge of the law, but extracting from it for future use all the sharp and cunning subtleties of which some vile men make bad use. To the firm came a letter from Mr. Bartholomew Whittingham, with the tenor of which Chaytor made himself familiar. He was a spy in the office, and never scrupled at opening letters and reading them on the sly to master their contents. In the letter which Basil's uncle wrote occurred these words :

“Send me in a registered packet, by first post, my will, the will I made in favour of my nephew, Mr. Basil Wittingham. He has acted like a fool, and I am going to destroy it and disinherit him. At some future time I will give you instructions to draw up another, making different dispositions of my property. I am not a young man, but I shall live a good many years yet, and there is plenty of time before me. Meanwhile bear witness by this letter that I have disinherited my nephew Basil Whittingham.”

Of course they followed his instructions, and the will was forwarded to him.

“He has stolen forty thousand pounds from me,” thought Chaytor.

Within a week thereafter he overheard a conversation between two of the principals. He was never above listening at doors and creeping up back staircases. The lawyers were speaking of Bartholomew Whittingham and the will.

“Will he destroy it?” asked one.

“I think not,” replied the other. “It is my opinion he will keep it by him, half intending to destroy it, half to preserve it, and that it will be found intact and unaltered when he dies.”

“I do not agree with you. He will destroy it one day in a rage, and make another the next.”

“In favour of whom?”

“Of his nephew. He has in his heart an absorbing love for the young gentleman, and he is a good fellow at bottom. Mr. Basil Whittingham will come into the whole of the property.”

The conversation was continued on these lines, and the partners ultimately agreed that after all Basil would be the heir. “There is a chance yet,” thought Chaytor, for although

the dangerous period of ecstasy was passed there still lingered in his mind a hope of fortunate possibilities.

He continued his evil courses, gambled, drank, and led a free life, getting deeper and deeper into debt. His mother assisted him out of many a scrape, and never for one single moment wavered in her faith in him, in her love for him. It was a sweet trait in her character, but love without wisdom is frequently productive of more harm than good. Chaytor's position grew so desperate that detection and its attendant disgraceful penalty became imminent. He had made himself a proficient and skilful imitator of handwriting, and more than once had he forged his father's name to cheques and bills. The father was aware of this, but out of tenderness for his wife had done nothing more than upbraid his son for the infamy. Many a stormy scene had passed between them, which both carefully concealed from the knowledge of the fond woman whose heart would have been broken had she known the truth. On every one of these occasions Chaytor had humbled himself and promised atonement, with tears and sighs and mock

repentance which saddened but did not convince the father.

“For your mother’s sake,” invariably he said.

“Yes, yes,” murmured the hypocrite, “for my dear mother’s sake—my mother, so good, so loving, so tender-hearted!”

“Let this be the last time,” said the father sternly.

“It shall be, it shall be!” murmured the son.

It was a formula. The father may sometimes have deceived himself into belief; the son, never. Even while he was humbling himself he would be casting about for the next throw.

This continued for some considerable time, but at length came the crash. Chaytor and his parents were seated at breakfast at nine o’clock. The father had the morning letters in his pocket; he had read them and put them by. He cast but one glance at his son, and Chaytor turned pale and winced. He saw that the storm was about to burst. As usual, nothing was said before Mrs. Chaytor. The meal was over, she kissed her son, and left the room to attend to her domestic affairs.

"I must be off," said Chaytor. "Mustn't be late this morning. A lot to attend to at the office."

"You need not hurry," said the father. "I have something to say to you."

"Won't it keep till the evening?"

"No. It must be said here and now." He stepped to the door and locked it. "We will spare her as long as possible; she will know soon enough."

"Oh, all right," said Chaytor sullenly. "Fire away."

The father took out his letters, and, selecting one, handed it to his son who read it, shivered, and returned it.

"What have you to say to it?" asked the father.

"Nothing. It is only for three hundred pounds."

"A bill, due to-day, which I did not sign."

"It was done for all our sakes, to save the honour of the family name. I was in a hole and there was no other way of getting out of it."

"The bill must be taken up before twelve o'clock."

"Will it be?"

“It will, for your mother’s sake.”

“Then there is nothing more to be said. I am very sorry, but it could not be helped. I promise that it shall never occur again. I’ll take my oath of it if you like.”

“I take neither your word nor your oath. You are a scoundrel.”

“Here, draw it mild. I am your son.”

“Unhappily. If your mother were not living you should be shown into the dock for the forgery.”

“But she is alive. I shall not appear in the dock, and you may as well let me go. Look here, father, what’s the use of crying over spilt milk?”

“Not much; and as I look upon you as hopeless, I would go on paying for it while your mother lived. If she were taken from me I should leave you to the punishment you deserve, and risk my name being dragged through the mire.”

“I hope,” said Chaytor, with vile sanctimoniousness, “that my dear mother will live till she is a hundred.”

“There is, I must remind you, another side to the shield. I said ‘as long as I can afford it.’”

“Well, you can afford it.”

“I cannot,” said Mr. Chaytor, with a sour smile. “My career snaps to-day, after paying this forged bill with money that properly belongs to my creditors. Newman Chaytor, you have come to the end of your tether.”

“You are saying this to frighten me,” said Chaytor, affecting an indifference he did not feel. “Why, you are rolling in money.”

“You are mistaken. Speculations into which I have entered have failed disastrously. If you had not robbed me to the tune of thousands of pounds—the sum total of your villainies amounts to that—I might have weathered the storm, but as I am situated it is impossible. It is almost a triumph to me to stand here before you a ruined man, knowing you can no longer rob me.”

“Still I do not believe you,” said Chaytor.

“Wait and see; you will not have to wait long.”

The tone in which he uttered this carried conviction with it.

“Do you know what you have done?” cried Chaytor furiously. “You have ruined *me!*”

“What!” responded Mr. Chaytor, with

savage sarcasm. "Is there any more of this kind of paper floating about?" Chaytor bit his lips, and his fingers twitched nervously, but he did not reply. "If there is, be advised, and prepare for it. In the list of my liabilities, which is now being prepared, there will be no place for them. How should there be, when I am in ignorance of your prospective villainies. Do you see now to what you have brought me?"

"Do *you* see to what you have brought *me*?" exclaimed Chaytor, in despair. "Why did you not tell me of it months ago?"

"Because I hoped by other speculations to set myself straight. But everything has gone wrong — everything. Understand, I cannot trouble myself about your affairs; I have enough to do with my own. I have one satisfaction: your mother will not suffer."

"How is that?"

"The settlement I made upon her in the days of my prosperity is hers absolutely, and only she can deal with it. In the settlement of my business there shall be no sentimental folly; I will see to that. Her money shall not go to pay my debts."

"But it shall go," thought Chaytor, with

secret joy, "to get me out of the scrape I am in. It belongs to me by right. *I* will see that neither you nor your creditors tamper with it." He breathed more freely ; he could still defy the world.

"I have not told you quite all," continued Mr. Chaytor. "Here is a letter from Messrs. Rivington, Sons, and Rivington, advising me that it will be better for all parties that you do not make your appearance in their office. Indeed, the place you occupied there is already filled up."

"Do they give any reason for it?" asked Chaytor, inwardly not greatly astonished at his dismissal.

"None ; nor shall I ask any questions of them or you. You know now how the land lies. Good morning."

He unlocked the door, and left the house. This was just what Chaytor desired. His vicious mind was quick in expedients ; his mother was his shield and his anchor. Her settlement would serve for many a long day yet. To her he went, and related his troubles in his own way. She gave him, as usual, her fullest sympathy, and promised all he asked.

"Between ourselves, mother," he said.

“Yes, my darling, between ourselves.”

“Father must not know. He was always hard on me. He thinks he can manage everybody’s affairs, but he cannot manage his own.” Then he disclosed to her his father’s difficulties. “If he had allowed me to manage for him it would not have happened. Trust everything to me, mother, and this day year I will treble your little fortune for you. Let me have a chance for once. When I have made all our fortunes you shall go to him and say, ‘See what Newman has done for us.’”

“It shall be exactly as you say, darling. You are the best, the handsomest, the cleverest son a foolish mother ever had.”

Kisses and caresses sealed the bargain.

Within twenty-four hours he knew that everything his father had told him was true. The family were ruined, and but for Mrs. Chaytor’s private fortune would have been utterly beggared. They moved into a smaller house and practised economy. Little by little Chaytor received and squandered every shilling his mother possessed, and before the year was out the sun rose upon a ship beating on the rocks.

“Are you satisfied?” asked his father, from whom Chaytor’s doings could no longer be concealed.

“Satisfied!” cried Chaytor, trembling in every limb. “When your insane speculations have ruined us!”

Then he fell into a chair and began to sob. He had the best of reasons for tribulation. With his mind’s eye he saw the prison doors open to receive him. It was not shame that made him suffer; it was fear.

Again, and for the last time, he went to his mother for help.

“What can I do, my boy?” quavered the poor woman. “What can I do? I haven’t a shilling in the world.”

He implored her to go to his father.

“He can save me,” cried the terror-stricken wretch. “He can, he can!”

She obeyed him, and the father sent for his son.

“Tell me all,” he said. “Conceal nothing, or, as there is a heaven above us, I leave you to your fate.”

The shameful story told, the father said, “Things were looking up with me, but here is another knock-down blow, and from my

own flesh and blood. I accept it, and will submit once more to be ruined by you."

"Bless you, father, bless you," whined Chaytor, taking his father's hand and attempting to fondle it. Mr. Chaytor plucked his hand away.

"There is, however, a condition attached to the promise."

"What condition?" faltered Chaytor.

"That you leave England and never return. Do you hear me? Never. You will go to the other end of the world, where you will end your days."

"To Australia!"

"To Australia. When you quit this country I wish never to hear from you; I shall regard you as dead. You shall no longer trade upon your mother's weak love for you. I will not argue with you. Accept or refuse."

"I accept."

"Very well. Go from this house and never let me look upon your face again."

"Can I not see my mother," whined Chaytor, "to wish her good-bye?"

"No. You want to hatch further troubles. You shall not do so. Quit my house."

With head bent low in mock humility Chaytor left the house. He had no sincere wish to see his mother ; he had got out of her all he could, and she was of no use to him in the future. The promise his father made was fulfilled ; the fresh forgeries he had perpetrated were bought up, but one still remained of which he had made no mention. This was a bill for a large amount which he had accepted in the name of Rivington, Sons and Rivington. It had still two months to run, and Chaytor determined to remain in England till within a week or two of its becoming due ; something might turn up which would enable him to meet it. He loved the excitements of English life ; Australia was banishment ; but perhaps, after all, if he were forced to go it might be the making of him. He had read of rough men making fortunes in a week on the gold-fields. Why should not he ?

The last blow proved too much for Mr. Chaytor ; it broke him up utterly. He was seized with a serious illness which reduced him to imbecility. The home had to be sold, and he and his wife removed to lodgings, one small room at the top of a house in a poor neighbourhood. There poverty fell upon them like

a wolf. Five weeks afterwards Chaytor, slouching through the streets on a rainy night, saw his mother begging in the roadway. The poor soul stood mute, with a box of matches in her hand. Chaytor turned and fled.

“I am the unluckiest dog that ever was born,” he muttered. “Just as I was going to see if I could get anything out of her!”

It was now imperative that he should leave England, and he managed to get a passage in a sailing vessel as assistant steward at a shilling a month. He obtained it by means of forged letters of recommendation, and he went out in a false name. This he would have retained had it not been that shortly after his arrival in Australia he met a man who had known him in London, and who addressed him by his proper name. It was not the only inconvenience to which an alias subjected him. There was only one address in the colonies through which he could obtain his letters, and that was the Post Office. Obviously, if he called himself John Smith he could not expect letters to be delivered to him in the name of Newman Chaytor. Now, he was eager for letters from the old country; before he left it he had written to his mother to the effect that

he was driven out of it by a hard-hearted father, and that if she had any good news to communicate to him he would be glad to hear from her. At the same time he imposed upon her the obligation of not letting anyone know where he was. Therefore, when his London acquaintance addressed him by his proper name, saying, "Hallo, Chaytor, old boy!" he said to himself, "Oh hang it! I'll stick to Newman Chaytor, and chance it. If mother writes to me I shall have to proclaim myself Chaytor; an alias might get me into all sorts of trouble."

Why did he write to his poor mother, for whom he had not the least affection, and what did he mean by expecting her to have any good news to communicate to him? The last time he saw her, was she not begging in the streets? Well, there was a clear reason; he seldom did anything without one; and be sure that the kernel of that reason was Self. His father, from the wreck of his fortune, had managed to preserve a number of shares in some companies which had failed, among them two mining companies which had come to grief. Now, it had happened before and might happen again, that companies which

were valueless one day had leaped into favour the next, that shares which yesterday could have been purchased for a song, to-morrow would be worth thousands of pounds. Suppose that this happened to the companies, or to one of them, in which his pauper father held shares. He was his father's only child, and his mother would see that he was not disinherited. Chaytor was a man who never threw away a chance, and he would not throw away this, remote as it was. Hence his determination to adhere at all hazards to his proper name. The perilous excitements of the last two or three years had driven Basil Whittingham out of his mind, but having more leisure and less to occupy his thoughts in the colonies, he thought of him now and then, and wondered whether the old uncle had relented and had taken his nephew again into his favour. "Lucky young beggar," he thought. "I wish I stood in his shoes, and he in mine. I would soon work the old codger into a proper mood." His colonial career was neither profitable nor creditable, and he had degenerated into what he was when he and Basil came face to face in Gum Flat, an unadulterated gambler and loafer.

The strange encounter awoke within him forces which had long lain dormant. He recognised a possible chance which might be worked to his benefit, and he fastened to it like a limpet. When he said to Basil that he was in luck he really meant it.

A word as to his false beard and whiskers. In London he had had a behind-the-scenes acquaintance, and in a private theatrical performance in which he played a part he had worn these identical appendages as an adjunct to the character he represented. He had brought them out with him, thinking they might be serviceable one day. Before he came to Gum Flat he had got into a scrape on another township, and when he left it, had assumed the false hair as a kind of disguise. Making his appearance on Gum Flat thus disguised, he deemed it prudent to retain it, and when he came into association with Basil he thanked his stars that he had done so ; otherwise he might have drawn upon himself from the man he called his double a closer attention than he desired.

CHAPTER XII.

IN the middle of the night Basil awoke. He had had a tiring day, but when he had slept off the first effects of the fatigue he had undergone, the exciting events of the last two days became again the dominant power. He dreamt of all that had occurred from the interview between himself and Anthony Bidaud, in which he had accepted the guardianship of Annette, to the moment of his arrival on Gum Flat. Of Newman Chaytor he dreamt not at all ; this new acquaintance had produced no abiding impression upon him.

He lay awake for some five minutes or so in that condition of quiescent wonder which often falls upon men when they are sleeping for the first time in a strange bed and in a place with which they are not familiar. Where was he ? What was the position of the bed ? Where was the door situated : at the foot, or the head, or the side of the bed ? Was there a

window in the apartment, and if so, where was it? Then came the mental question what had aroused him?

It was so unusual for him to wake in the middle of the night that he dwelt upon this question. Something must have disturbed him. What?

Was it fancy that just at the moment of his awaking he had heard a movement in the room, that he had felt a hand upon him, that he had heard a man's breathing? It must have been, all was so quiet and still. Suddenly he sat straight up on the stretcher. He remembered that he was in the township of Gum Flat, sleeping in a strange apartment, and that men with whom he had not been favourably impressed must be lying near him. This did not apply to Newman Chaytor, who had been kind and attentive, and whom he now thought of with gratitude. There was nothing to fear from him, but the other three had gazed at him furtively and with no friendly feelings. He had exchanged but a few words with these men, and those had been words of suspicion. When he entered the store, after attending to his horse, they had not addressed a word to him. It was Chaytor,

and Chaytor alone, who had shown kindness and evinced a kindly feeling. And now he was certain that someone had been in the room while he slept, and had laid hands on him. For what purpose?

He slid from the stretcher, and standing upright stretched out his hands in the darkness. Where was the door?

Outside the canvas building stood Chaytor's three mates, wide awake, with their heads close together, as they had been inside on the return of Basil and Chaytor from the stable. They were conversing in whispers.

"Did he hear you?"

"No. If he had moved I would have knocked him on the head."

"Have you got it?"

"Yes, it is all right."

"Pass it round."

"No; I will keep it till it's sold; then we'll divide equally."

"What do you think it's worth?"

"Twenty pounds, I should say."

"Little enough."

"Hush!"

The sound of Basil moving about his room, groping for the door, had reached them.

“ If he comes out, Jim, you tackle him.”

“ Leave him to me. Don't waste any more time. Get the horse from the stable.”

Basil, unable to find the door, stumbled against the calico portion which divided his room from that in which Chaytor slept.

“ Who's there ? ” cried Chaytor, jumping up.

“ Oh, it's you,” said Basil, recognising the voice. “ Have you got a light ? ”

“ Wait a moment.”

But half dressed he presented himself to Basil, with a lighted candle in his hand.

“ What's up ? ” he asked.

“ I don't know,” replied Basil, “ but I am not easy in my mind. Perhaps it is only my fancy, but I have an idea that someone has been in my room.”

“ Let us see.”

They proceeded to the three compartments which should have been occupied by the three men. They were empty.

“ It was not fancy,” said Basil. “ What mischief are they up to ? Come along ; we will go and see.”

Chaytor hesitated. He was not gifted with heroic qualities, and he knew that his three mates were desperate characters.

“Did you have any money about you?” he asked.

“None. Why, where’s my watch?” It was gone. There was a hurried movement without; he heard the sound of a horse’s feet. “They are stealing Corrie’s horse,” he cried, “after robbing me of my watch! Stand by me, will you?”

He rushed out, followed, but not too quickly, by Chaytor. The moment he reached the open a pair of arms was thrown around him, and he was grappling with an enemy. In unfamiliar ground, enveloped in darkness, and attacked by an unseen enemy, he was at a disadvantage, and it would have fared ill with him had he not been strong and stout-hearted. Jim the Hatter, who had undertaken to tackle him, soon discovered that the man they were robbing was not easily disposed of. Down they fell the pair of them, twisting and turning, each striving to obtain the advantage, Basil silent and resolved, Jim the Hatter giving tongue to many an execration. In the midst of the struggle the ruffian heard his mates, the Nonentities, moving off with Basil’s horse. His experiences had taught him that “honour among thieves”

was a fallacious proverb; anyway, he had never practised it himself, and he trusted no men. With a powerful effort he threw Basil from him and ran after his comrades. During the encounter Chaytor had kept at a safe distance, but now that there was a lull he came close to Basil.

"They have half throttled me," he gasped, tearing open his shirt and blowing like a grampus. "Are you hurt?"

"No," said Basil. "We may catch them yet."

And he began to run, but the ruffians had got the start of him, and knew the lay of the ground. Guided by his ear he stumbled on, across the plains, through a gully riddled with holes, and finally up a steep range, followed by Chaytor, panting and blowing. He had many a fall, and so had Chaytor (who thought it well to follow suit, and cried out from time to time, "O, O, O!"), and thus the flight and the pursuit continued, the sounds from the flying men and old Corrie's horse growing fainter and fainter, until matters came to a sudden termination.

Half-way up the range, which was veined with quartz, a shaft had been sunk and aban-

done. The miners who had done the work had followed a gold-bearing spur some fifty feet down, in the hope of coming upon a golden reef. But the spur grew thinner and thinner, the traces of gold disappeared, and they lost heart. Disappointed in their expectations, and out of patience with their profitless labour, they shouldered their windlass and started off to fresh pastures. Thus the mouth of the shaft was left open and unprotected, and into it Basil dropped, and felt himself slipping down with perilous celerity.

It was fortunate that the shaft was not exactly perpendicular. After following the spur down for twenty feet the miners had found that it took an eccentric turn which necessitated the running in of an adit. This passage was about two yards long, when the spur dipped again, and the shaft was continued sheer into the bowels of the earth. It was this adit which saved Basil's life. When he had slipped down the twenty feet he felt bottom, and there he lay, bruised, but not dangerously hurt.

He cried out for help at the top of his voice, and his cries were presently answered.

"Below there!" cried Chaytor, lying flat

on the ground above, with his ear at the mouth of the shaft.

“Is that you, Mr. Chaytor?” cried Basil.

Chaytor (aside): “He remembers my name.” (Aloud): “Yes, what’s left of me. Where are you?” (Which, to say the least of it, was an unnecessary question.)

Basil: “Down here.”

Chaytor (blind to logical fact): “Alive?”

Basil (perceiving nothing strange in the question, and therefore almost as blind): “Yes, thank God!”

Chaytor: “Any bones broke?”

Basil: “I think not, but I am bruised a bit.”

Chaytor: “So am I.”

Basil: “I am sorry to hear it. Have the scoundrels got away?”

Chaytor: “Yes, they’re a mile off by this time.”

Basil (groaning): “Old Corrie’s mare! What will he think of me?”

Chaytor: “It can’t be helped.”

Basil: “In which direction have they gone?”

Chaytor: Haven’t the slightest idea. I warned you against them.”

Basil: "You did. You're a good fellow, but what could I do?"

Chaytor: "Neither of us could have prevented it."

Basil: "I am not so sure. I ought to have stopped up all night, and looked after what wasn't my own."

Chaytor (attempting consolation): "Why, you couldn't keep your eyes open."

Basil (groaning again): "I ought to have kept my eyes open. I had no right to sleep after your warning."

Chaytor: "I did what I could."

Basil: "You did; you're a true friend."
(Chaytor smiled.) "How am I to get up from here?"

Chaytor: "That's the question. How far are you down?"

Basil: "Heaven knows. It seems a mile or so."

Chaytor: "There's no windlass."

Basil: "Isn't there?"

Chaytor: "And it's pitch dark."

Basil: "It's as black as night down here. Can't you go for help?"

Chaytor: "I'll tell you something. There isn't a soul on the township but ourselves."

Basil : " Not one ? "

Chaytor : " Not one. We must wait till daylight ; then I'll see what I can do. "

Basil : " There's no help for it ; it must be as you say. You'll not desert me ? "

Chaytor (in an injured tone) : " Can you think me capable of so dastardly an act ? "

Basil : " Forgive me ; I hardly know what I'm saying. I deserve that you should, for giving utterance to a thought so base. "

Chaytor : " It was natural, perhaps. Why should you trust me, a stranger, whom you have known for only a few hours ? "

Basil : " I do trust you ; it was an unnatural thought. You are a noble fellow—and a gentleman. "

Chaytor : " I hope so. Can I do anything for you while you are waiting ? "

Basil : " I am devoured by thirst. Can you manage to get a drink of water to me ? "

Chaytor : " I can do that ; but you must have patience. I shall have to go back to the township to get a bottle and some string. Shall I go ? "

Basil : " Yes, yes. Be as quick as you can. "

Chaytor: "I won't be a moment longer than I can help."

Then there was silence. Chaytor departed on his errand, and Basil was left to himself. His right arm was bruised and sore, but he contrived to feel in his pockets for matches. A box was there, but it was empty, and he remembered that he had struck the last one at the end of his long ride from Bidaud's plantation, just before he arrived in Gum Flat. He knew, from feeling the opening of the adit, that it was likely he was not at the bottom of the shaft, and he was fearful of moving, lest he should fall into a pit. He thought of Newman Chaytor. "What a good fellow he is! I should be dead but for him. It is truly noble of him to stick to me as he is doing. He has nothing to gain by it, and he is saving my life. Yes, I will accept his proposal to go mates with him, for I have no place now on Bidaud's plantation. Poor Annette—poor child! I hope she will be happy. I hope her uncle and aunt will be kind to her. I must see her again before I go for good, and then we shall never meet again, never, never! I would give the best twenty years of my life—if I am fated to live

—to be her brother, with authority to protect her and shield her from Gilbert Bidaud. He is a villain, a smooth-tongued villain, a thousand times worse than these scoundrels who have robbed me and brought me to this. What will old Corrie say when he hears I have lost his mare? Will he think I am lying—will he think I have sold his horse and pocketed the money? If so, and it gets to Annette's ears, how she will despise me! I must see her, I must, to clear myself. Gilbert Bidaud will do all he can to prevent it, and he may succeed; but I will try, I will try. If I had a hundred pounds I would buy another horse for old Corrie, a better one than that I have lost, but I haven't a shilling. A sorry plight. There is only one human being in the world I can call friend, and that is Mr. Chaytor, who has taken such a strange fancy for me. Yesterday there was old Corrie, there was Anthony Bidaud, there was Annette. One is dead, the others may cast me off. It is a cruel world. How long Mr. Chaytor is! It seems an age. Shame on you, Basil, for reviling! There is goodness, there is sweetness, there is faithfulness in the world. Don't whine, old man. All may yet be well, though

for the life of me I can't see how it is to be brought about."

Then he fainted, but only for a few seconds; when he opened his eyes again he thought hours must have elapsed.

In truth Chaytor was absent no longer than was necessary, but he was also mentally busy with the adventures of the last few hours. The man whose phantom shadow had haunted him in London was now at his mercy. Basil's life was absolutely at his disposal. To leave him where he was in that desolate spot at the bottom of a deserted shaft would be to ensure for him a sure and certain death, and if he wished to make assurance doubly sure, all he had to do would be to roll a great stone upon him. But that would be a crime, and, hardened as he was, he shrank from committing it. Not from any impulse of mercy, but because he had nothing at present to gain from it. There was much to learn, much to do before he nerved himself to a desperate deed which, after all, might by some stroke of good fortune be unnecessary. And indeed it was only the accident which had befallen Basil that darkened his soul with cruel suggestion. The sleeping forces which lurk

in the souls of such men as Newman Chaytor often leap into active life by some unfortunate circumstance in which they have no direct hand.

He was back at the shaft, leaning over it, with a bottle of water not too tightly corked, to the neck of which was attached a long piece of cord.

“Are you there?” he called out.

“Heaven be thanked!” said Basil. “What a time you have been.”

“I have not been away an hour.”

“Is that really so?”

“It is, but it must have seemed long to you.”

“Weeks seem to have passed.”

“I have a bottle of water which I will send down to you.”

“God bless you!”

“When you get it, loosen the string from the neck of the bottle, and I will send down what remains of the flask of brandy. It will do you no harm.”

“I can never repay you for your goodness to me.”

“Yes, you can. Look out.”

The bottle of water was lowered, and after-

wards the flask of brandy. Basil took a long draught of water, half emptying the bottle, and sipped sparingly of the brandy.

“You have given me life, Mr. Chaytor.”

“Psha! I have done nothing worth making a fuss about. Oblige me by dropping the Mr.”

“I will. With all my heart and soul I thank you, Chaytor.”

“You are heartily welcome, Basil. There is a light coming into the sky.”

“Sunrise! How beautiful the world is!”

“Listen,” said Chaytor; “I will tell you what I am going to do.”



CHAPTER XIII.

“ I AM listening,” said Basil.

“ There is no windlass, as I have told you,” said Chaytor, “ so I must devise something in its place to pull you up. The mischief is that I am alone, and have no one to help me. However, I must do the best I can. I am going to roll the trunk of a tree to the top of the shaft, then tie a rope firmly round it so that you can climb into the world again. It must be dreadful down there.”

“ It is,” groaned Basil.

“ I can imagine it,” said Chaytor, complacently ; “ but you mustn’t mind biding a bit. No man could do more than I am doing.”

“ Indeed he could not.”

“ The tree is six or seven hundred yards off, and I dare say I shall be an hour over the job. I can’t help that, you know.”

“ Of course you can’t. I can’t find words to express my gratitude for all the trouble you are taking. And for a stranger, too !”

“I don’t look upon you as a stranger ; I feel as if I had known you all my life. I suppose, though, it is really but the commencement of a friendship which will last I hope till we are both old men.”

“I hope so, too.”

“A little while ago I was saying to myself, I will never trust another man as long as I live ; I will never believe in another ; I will never again confide in man or woman. I have been deceived, Basil.”

“I am truly sorry to hear it.”

“Yes, I have been deceived. Friend after friend have I trusted, have I helped, have I ruined myself for, to find them in the end false, selfish and unreliable. I was filled with disgust and with shame for my species. ‘I renounce you all,’ I cried in the bitterness of my soul. But now everything seems changed. Since you came my faith in human goodness and sincerity and truth is restored. I don’t know why, but it is so. I can rely upon your friendship, Basil ? ”

“You can. I will never forget your goodness ; never.”

“I am going, now, to roll the tree to the shaft. Be as patient as you can.”

He did not go far. The slim trunk that he spoke of lay not six or seven hundred yards off, but quite close to the shaft, and he knew that Basil in his pursuit of the robbers could not have observed it. He was master of the situation; Basil was at his mercy, and every word he had uttered was intended to bind the unsuspecting man more firmly to him. "He is a soft-hearted fool," thought Chaytor, "and I shall be able to bend him any way I please through the gratitude he feels for me. I think I spoke rather well. What is this?" He stooped and picked up a pocket-book which had slipped from Basil's pocket as he ran after the thieves.

Retreating still farther from the shaft, to make assurance doubly sure, Chaytor, with eager fingers and a greedy expectancy in his eyes, opened the book and examined the contents. Intrinsically they were of no value, but in their relation to the unformed design which was prompting Chaytor's actions their value was inestimable. There were memoranda of dates, events, names and addresses, and also some old letters. Any possible use of the latter did not occur to Chaytor, but his examination of the former was almost

instantly suggestive. They were in Basil's handwriting, some being dated and signed "B. W.", and would serve admirably as copies for anyone who desired to imitate the writing. Clear up and down strokes, without twists or eccentric curves, straightforward as Basil himself. "This is a find," thought Chaytor; "Providence is certainly on my side. In a week I shall be able to write so exactly like Basil that he will be ready to swear my writing is his. There is information, too, in the book which may prove serviceable. I'll stick to him while there's a chance, and I'll contrive so that he shall stick to me. I haven't done badly up to now."

More than an hour did Chaytor employ in cunning cogitation, smoking the while in a state of comfortable haziness as to the future. Imagination gilded the prospect and clothed it with alluring fancies; and that the roads which led to it were dark and devious did not deter him from revelling in the contemplation. Time was up. Panting and blowing, he rolled the tree-trunk to the shaft.

"Below there!" he called out.

"Ah!" replied Basil; "you are back again."

"I have had a terrible job," said the hypocrite, "and almost despaired of accomplishing it, but stout heart and willing hands put strength into a fellow, and the tree is here. Look out for yourself while I roll it across the shaft. The earth may be rotten, and some bits will roll down, perhaps, though I'll do all I can to prevent it."

"Thank you, a thousand, thousand times. There's a little tunnel here ; I'll get into it while you're at work above."

With loud evidences of arduous toil Chaytor placed the trunk in position, and then made the rope secure around it.

"Now," said Chaytor, "all is ready, Basil, and I'm going to lower the rope. Have you got it?"

"Yes," replied Basil, in a faint tone.

"You will have to pull yourself up by it. I will keep the rope as tight and steady as I can, and that is as much as I can do. Do you think you will be able to manage it?"

"I must try, but I feel very weak. My strength is giving way."

"Don't let it, old fellow. Pluck up courage ; it's only for a few minutes, and

then you will be safe at the top. Now then, with a will!"

It required a will on Basil's part, he was so weak, and more than once he feared that it was all over with him; but at length the difficult feat was accomplished, and, with daylight shining once more on him, he reached the top, and was pulled from the mouth of the shaft by Chaytor's strong arms. Then, his strength quite gone, he sank lifeless to the ground.

Chaytor, gazing upon the helpless form, reflected. He had Basil's pocket-book packed safely away in an inner pocket of his waistcoat, one of those pockets which men who have anything to conceal, or who move in lawless places, have made in their garments. This book contained much that might be useful; for instance, the correct name and address of Basil's uncle in England, a statement of the debts which Basil had paid to keep his dead father's name clear from reproach, the address of the lawyers who had managed that transaction, the amount of the fortune that Basil's mother had bequeathed to him, and other such matters. Now, had Basil anything more upon his person which might

be turned to account in the future? If so, this was a favourable opportunity for Chaytor to possess himself of it. There would be no difficulty in satisfactorily explaining the loss of any property which Basil had about him. In the confusion and excitement of the last few hours anything might have happened.

Having decided the point, Chaytor's unscrupulous fingers became busy, and every article in Basil's pockets passed through his hands. With the exception of a purse, he replaced everything he had taken out. This purse contained a locket with a lock of hair in it; at the back of the locket was an inscription in Basil's writing — "My dear Mother's hair," her Christian name, the date of her death, and her age. There was no money in the purse. Undoubtedly Basil, when he recovered his senses, would miss his purse, but if his pocket-book slipped out of his pocket while running, why not that? Chaytor was perfectly easy in his mind as he deposited the purse by the side of the pocket-book inside his waistcoat.

Meanwhile Basil lay motionless. "I'll carry him a little way," thought Chaytor. "Anything might drop from his clothes while

he is hanging over my shoulder. I'll have as many arrows to my bow as I can manufacture. When he gets to his senses we will have a hunt for the purse and the pocket-book, and of course shall not find them." With a grim smile he raised Basil to a sitting posture, and gradually lifted him on to his shoulder. Clasping him firmly round the body, Chaytor staggered on.

Basil was no light weight, and Chaytor, while he was pursuing his dissipated life in London, had not been renowned for strength; but his colonial career had hardened his muscles, and enabled him now to perform a task which in years gone by would have been impossible. A dozen times he stopped to rest and wipe his brows. The form he carried was helpless and inert, but Basil's mind was stirred by the motion of being carried through the fresh air, and he began to babble. He thought he was upon old Corrie's mare, and he urged the animal on, muttering in disjointed and unconnected words that he must reach the township of Gum Flat that night, and be back again next day. Then he went on to babble about Annette and her father, and to a less intelli-

gent man than Chaytor—give him credit for that—his wandering talk might have been incoherent and meaningless. But Chaytor's intellect was refined and sharpened by the possibilities of a gilded future. He listened attentively to every word that fell from Basil's fevered lips, and put meaning to them, sometimes false, sometimes true.

"My friend Basil is in a delirium," said he during the intervals of Basil's muttering, "and I shall have to nurse him through a fever most likely. What with that probability, and the weight of him, I am earning my wage. No man could dispute that. He raves like a man in love about this Annette. How old is she? Is she pretty? Does she love him? Will she be rich? Is that a vein I could work to profit? I don't intend to throw away the shadow of a chance. An age seems to have passed since last night. But what," he cried suddenly, "if all my labour is being thrown away—what if I am following a will-o'-the-wisp?"

He let Basil slip purposely from his arms, and heedless of the sick man's groans, for the fall was violent, he looked down upon him as though a mortal enemy was in his path.

But one of the strongest elements in greed and avarice is the hope that leads their votaries on, and this and the superstitious feeling that the meeting had been brought about by fate, and was but the beginning of a fruitful end, dispelled the doubt that had arisen. "I will work for it," he muttered; "it is my only chance. Even if nothing comes of it I shall be no worse off. But something *shall* come of it—I swear it."

Reassured, he took up his burden, and in the course of an hour reached the dwelling they had occupied the previous night. By that time Basil was in a high fever, and Chaytor began to be disturbed by the fear that his double would die. Then, indeed, his labour would be lost and his hopes destroyed, for he had much to learn and much to do before the vague design which spurred him on could be developed and ripened.

Chaytor had a secret store of provisions which he had hoarded up unknown to Jim the Hatter and the Nonentities; some tins of preserved meat and soup, the remains of a sack of flour, two or three pounds of tea, a few bottles of spirits, and a supply of tobacco. These would have served for a longer time

than Basil's sickness lasted, and Chaytor comforted himself with the reflection that he could not have carried them away with him had he been compelled to leave the deserted township. It was really Basil's stout and healthy constitution that pulled him through a fever which would have proved fatal to many men. He did not recover his senses for sixteen days, and as he had nothing to conceal he, during that time, revealed to Chaytor in his wild wanderings much of his early life. When at length he opened his eyes, and they fell with dawning consciousness upon the man standing beside his bed, Chaytor was in possession of particulars innocent enough in themselves, but dangerous if intended to be used to a wily and dangerous end. During those sixteen days Chaytor had not been idle, having employed himself industriously in studying and imitating the few peculiarities in Basil's writing. To a past-master like himself this was not difficult, and he succeeded in producing an imitation so perfect as to deceive anyone familiar with Basil's style. He was careful in destroying every evidence of this vile study.

Basil's eyes fell upon Chaytor's face, and he was silent awhile. Chaytor also. Basil closed

his eyes, opened them again, and fell to once more pondering upon matters. Then Chaytor spoke.

“Do you know me at last?” he asked.

“Know you! At last!” echoed Basil. “I have seen you before—but where?”

“Here, in Gum Flat township.”

“I am in Gum Flat township. Yes, I remember, I was riding that way on old Corrie’s mare.” He jumped up, or rather tried to do so, his weak state frustrating his intention. “Where are the robbers?”

“That’s the question,” said Chaytor, “and echo answers. Not very satisfactory.”

“It is coming back to me little by little,” said Basil presently. “I arrived here late at night and found the township deserted by all but four men, three of them scoundrels, the fourth a noble fellow whose name was—was—what has happened to me that my memory plays me tricks? I have it now—whose name was Newman Chaytor.”

“A true bill. He stands before you.”

“You are the man. What occurred next? He found a stable for old Corrie’s mare, gave me food and a bed, while the three scoundrels looked on frowning. I slept like an unfaithful

steward ; the mare being Corrie's and not mine, and I doubtful of the character and intentions of the scoundrels, I should have kept watch over property that did not belong to me. Instead of doing that I consulted my own ease and pleasure."

"You could not help it; you were tired out."

"No excuse. I made no attempt to guard old Corrie's mare. If I had watched and fallen asleep from weariness at my post it might have been another matter. When I present myself to old Corrie, that is if I am ever able to stand upon my legs again, I shall put no gloss upon my conduct. He shall hear the plain unvarnished truth from the unfaithful steward's own lips. I am unworthy of confidence or friendship; I warn you. Newman Chaytor, put no trust in me."

"I would trust you," said Chaytor, with well-simulated candour, "with my life."

"The more fool you. Where was I? Oh, asleep in the comfortable bed you gave me while these scoundrels were planning robbery. In the middle of the night I woke up—pitch dark it was——forgive me for speaking ungratefully to you. My heart is over-

flowing with gratitude, but I am at the same time filled with remorse."

"Don't trouble about that, Basil," said Chaytor. "You can't hurt yourself in my esteem. Go on with your reminiscence; it is a healthy exercise; it will strengthen your wandering memory."

"Pitch dark it was. I was not sure then, but I am now, that thieves had been in my room. Have I been lying here long, Chaytor?"

"Two weeks and more."

"And have you been nursing me all that time?"

"As well as I could. You could have found no other nurse—though easy to find a better—in Gum Flat; you and I are the only two living humans in the township."

"Why did you not leave me to die?"

"Because I am not quite a brute."

"Forgive me for provoking such a reply. But why—indeed, why have you been so good to me?"

"I will answer you honestly, Basil. Because I love you."

He lowered his voice and bent his eyes to the ground as he made the false statement; and Basil turned his head, and a little sob

escaped him at the expression of devotion.

"I hope I may live to repay you," he said, holding out his hand, which Chaytor seized.

"You will. All I ask of you is not to desert me. Stick to me as a friend, as I have stuck to you; I have been so basely deceived in friendship that my faith in human goodness would be irrevocably shattered if you proved false." His voice faltered; tears came into his eyes.

"That will I never do. My life is yours."

"I want your heart."

"You have it. The world contains no nobler man than my friend, Newman Chaytor."

"I am well repaid. Now you must rest; you have talked enough."

"No, I will finish first. Hearing sounds outside the tent I called for your assistance. We went out together and were immediately attacked. Were you hurt much, Chaytor?"

"A little," replied Chaytor modestly. "A scratch or two not worth mentioning."

"It is like you to make light of your own injuries. We pursued the scoundrels through the darkness, but they knew the ground they

were travelling, we did not. An uncovered shaft lay in my way, and down I fell. That is all I remember. But I know that my bones would be bleaching there at the present moment if it had not been for you."

"Try to remember a little more," said Chaytor, anxious that not a grain of credit should be lost to him. "I came up to the shaft sorely bruised, and called out to you."

"Yes, yes, it comes back to me. You brought me some brandy—you cheered and comforted me—you rolled the trunk of a tree over the mouth of the shaft—it was half a mile away—and after hours of terrible agony I was brought into the sweet light of day. But for you I should have died. Indeed and indeed, I remember nothing more. You must tell me the rest."

This Chaytor did with an affectation of modesty, but with absolute exaggeration of the services he had rendered, and Basil lay and listened, and his heart went out to the man who had proved so devoted a friend, and had sacrificed so much for his sake.

"My gratitude is yours to my dying day," he said. "No man ever did for another what you have done for me. Give me my clothes."

"You are not strong enough yet to get up, Basil."

"I don't want to get up. I want to see what the scoundrels have left in my pockets." He felt, and cried: "Everything gone! my purse, my pocket-book, everything—even a lock of my mother's hair. They might have left me that!"

"They made a clean sweep, I suppose," said Chaytor.

He had considered this matter while Basil lay unconscious, and had come to the conclusion that it would be wiser to strip Basil's pockets bare than to make a selection of one or two things, which was scarcely what a thief in his haste would have done. Thus it was that Basil found his pockets completely empty.

"You have for a friend the neediest beggar that ever drew breath," said Basil bitterly.

"I'll put up with that," said Chaytor, with great cheerfulness. "Now, don't worry yourself about anything whatever. You shall share with me to the last pipe of tobacco, and when that's gone we will work for more."

"Ah, tobacco! Would a whiff or two do me any harm?"

“Do you good. You’ll have to smoke out of my pipe; the villains have stolen yours.”

He filled his pipe, and, giving it to Basil, held a lighted match to the tobacco. Basil, lying on his side, watched the curling smoke as it floated above his head. Distressed as he was, the evidences of Newman Chaytor’s goodness were to some extent a compensating balance to his troubles. And now he was enjoying the soothing influence of a quiet smoke. Those persons who regard the weed as noxious and baleful have a perfect right to their opinion, but they cannot ignore the fact that to many thousands of thousands of estimable beings it serves as a comforter, frequently indeed as a healer. It was so in the present instance. As the smoke wreathed and curled above him an ineffable consolation crept into Basil’s soul. Things seemed at their blackest; the peace and hope of a bright future had been destroyed; the man who had grown to honour him, and who had assured him of the future, had with awful suddenness breathed his last breath; the little child he loved, and to whom he was to have been guardian and protector, was thrust into the care of a malignant, remorseless man;

suspicion of foul play had been thrown upon him; old Corrie had lent him his mare, and he had allowed it to be stolen; he had been so near to death that but one man, and he a short time since an utter stranger, stood between him and eternity; and he was lying now on a bed of sickness an utter, utter beggar. Grim enough in all conscience, but the simple smoking of a pipe put a different and a better aspect upon it. There was hope in the future; he was young, he would get well and strong again; Anthony Bidaud was dead, but spiritual comfort died not with life; he would see Annette once more, and would take his leave of her assured of her love, so far as a child could give such an assurance, and in the hope of meeting her again in years to come; he would outlive the injurious suspicion of wrong-dealing which he did not doubt Gilbert Bidaud was spreading against him; and he would be able to vindicate himself in old Corrie's eyes, and perhaps by-and-by recompense the old fellow for the loss of the mare. Much virtue in a pipe when it can so transform the prospect stretching before a man brought to such a pass as Basil had been.

"Yes," he said aloud, "all will come right in the end."

"Of course it will," said Chaytor. "What special mental question are you answering?"

"Nothing special. I was thinking in a general way of my troubles, and your pipe has put a more cheerful colour on them. Am I mistaken in thinking you told me you were a doctor?"

"No. That is why I have been able to pull you through so quickly."

"How long will it be before I am able to get about?"

"At the end of the week if you will be reasonable."

"I promise. I feel well already. The moment I am strong enough I must go to Bidaud's plantation."

"I will go with you."

"Of course. We are mates from this day forth. The end of the week? Not earlier?"

"Don't be impatient. My plan is to make a perfect cure. No patching. At present I am in command."

"I obey. But let it be as soon as possible."

Chaytor congratulated himself. However

things turned out in the future, all had gone on swimmingly up to this moment. Every little move he had made had been successful. Basil had not the slightest suspicion that it was he who had stolen his pocket-book and purse, and emptied his pockets.

“If an angel from heaven,” chuckled Chaytor that night, as he walked to and fro outside the store, “came and told him the truth, he would not believe it. I have him under my thumb—under my thumb. How to work his old uncle in England? How to get hold of that forty thousand pounds? It must not go out of the family; I will not submit to it. Would a letter or two from Basil, written by me in Basil’s hand, do any good? I don’t mind eating any amount of humble pie to accomplish my purpose. Even were it not a vicarious humiliation I am willing to do it, the money being guided into its proper channel, and Basil safely out of the way.”

He paused, with a sinister look in his eyes. Had Basil seen him then he would hardly have recognised him. Dark thoughts flitted through his mind, and animated his features.

“Nothing shall stop me,” he cried,

“nothing!” And he raised his hand to the skies as though registering an oath. A sad cloud stole upon the moon and obscured its light. “What is life without enjoyment?” he muttered. “By fair means or foul I mean to enjoy. I should like to know what we are sent into the world for if we are deprived of a fair share of the best things?” There being no one to answer him, he presently went inside to bed.

The next day Basil was so much better that without asking permission he got up and dressed himself. Chaytor did not remonstrate with him; he knew, now that Basil was mending, that he would mend quickly. So it proved; before the week was out the two men set forth on the tramp to Bidaud’s plantations.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT noon on the second day they were within hail of old Corrie's hut. It was meal time, and the old woodman was cooking his dinner. Balanced on a blazing log was a frying-pan filled with mutton-chops, some half-dozen or so, which were not more than enough for a tough-limbed fellow working from sunrise till sunset in the open air. He looked up as Basil and Chaytor approached, and with a nod of his head proceeded to turn the frizzling chops in the pan. This was his way; he was the reverse of demonstrative.

Such a greeting from another man, and that man a friend, would have disconcerted Basil, but he was familiar with old Corrie's peculiarities, and had it not been for his own inward disquiet regarding the mare, he would have felt quite at his ease.

"Back again," said old Corrie, transferring a couple of chops on to a tin plate.

"Yes," said Basil.

"Been away longer than you expected."

"Yes."

"On the tramp?"

"Yes. Look here, Corrie——"

"There's no hurry," interrupted old Corrie.

"You must be hungry. Go inside, and you'll see half a sheep dressed. Cut off what you want and cook it while the fire serves."

"But I would rather say first what I have to say. When I've told you all, my mate and I might not be welcome."

"Don't risk it, then. Never run to court trouble, Master Basil. I'm an older man than you; take the advice I give you."

"It is good advice," said Chaytor, whose appetite was sharp set, and to whom the smell of the chops was well-nigh maddening.

Old Corrie looked at him with penetrating eyes, and Chaytor bore the gaze well. He was not deficient in a certain quality of courage when he was out of peril and master of the situation, as he believed himself to be here. Old Corrie showed no sign of approval or disapproval, but proceeded quietly with his dinner. Basil took the woodman's advice. He went into the hut, cut a sufficient number of chops from the half body of the sheep

which was hanging up, and came back and took possession of the frying-pan, which was now at his disposal. Chaytor looked on; he had not been made exactly welcome, and was in doubt of old Corrie's opinion of him, therefore he did not feel warranted in making himself at home. When the young men commenced their meal, old Corrie had finished his, and now, pipe in mouth, he leant his back against a great tree and contemplated his guests.

"Little lady! Little lady!"

The sound came from within the hut. Chaytor started, Basil looked up with a piece of mutton between his thumb and knife: forks they had none.

"Basil! Basil! Basil and Annette! Little lady! Little lady!"

"It's the magpie I told you about," said old Corrie to Basil, "the last time I saw you."

"Its vocabulary is extended," said Basil.

"By request," said old Corrie in a pleasant voice, "of the little lady herself."

Basil glowed. Annette had not forgotten him, even thought kindly of him; otherwise, why should she wish that the bird old Corrie was training for her should become familiar

with his name? Chaytor smarted under a sense of injury. Basil and old Corrie were speaking of something which he did not understand—a proof that Basil had not told him everything. This, in Chaytor's estimation, was underhanded and injurious. Basil and everything in relation to him, his antecedents, his whole story, belonged by right to him, Newman Chaytor, who had saved his life, who had the strongest claim of gratitude upon him which a man could possibly have. Old Corrie noted the vindictive flash in his eyes, but made no comment upon it.

“And is that really a bird?” said Chaytor in a tone of polite inquiry.

“Go and see for yourself,” replied old Corrie; “but don't go too close. It hasn't the best of tempers.”

“I should like to see the bird that could frighten me,” said Chaytor, rising.

“Should you?” said old Corrie. “Then on second thoughts I prefer that you stay where you are.”

Chaytor laughed and resumed his seat. The meal proceeded in silence after this, and when the last chop was disposed of, old Corrie said: “Now we will have our

chat, Master Basil; and as we've a few private matters to talk of, our mate here perhaps——”

The hint was plain, though imperfectly expressed.

“I am in the way,” said Chaytor. I’ll smoke my pipe in the woods. Coo-ey when you want me, Basil.”

He strode off; exterior genial and placid, interior like a volcano. “He shall pay for it,” was his thought. It pleased him to garner up a store of imaginary injuries which were to be requited in the future. Then, when the time arrived for him to deal a blow, it would be merely giving tit for tat. Many men besides Chaytor reason in this crooked way, but none whose natures and motives are honourable and straightforward.

“Where did you pick him up?” asked old Corrie when he and Basil were alone.

“I want to speak to you first about your mare,” said Basil.

“And I want to know first where you picked up your new mate,” persisted Corrie.

“He saved my life,” said Basil. “Had it not been for his great and unselfish kindness I should not be here to-day.” Then he told

the woodman all that he knew of Chaytor, and dilated in glowing terms upon his noble conduct.

“It sounds well,” said old Corrie, “and I have nothing to say in contradiction; only I have a crank in me. I look into a man’s face and I like him, and I look into a man’s face and I don’t like him. The first time I clapped eyes on you, Master Basil, I took a fancy to you. I can’t say the same for your mate, but let it stand. I had it in my mind to make a proposition to you in case you came back in time, but I doubt whether it can be carried out now. Have you entered into a bargain to go mates with him?”

“I have, and have no wish to break it. I should be the basest of men if I tried to throw him over.”

“Keep to your word, lad; I’m the loser, for I thought it likely the two of us might strike up a partnership.”

“Why not the three of us?” asked Basil, to whom the prospect of working with old Corrie was very agreeable.

“Because in the first place it wouldn’t suit me, and in the second it wouldn’t suit him.”

“But if he were willing?”

Old Corrie bent his brows kindly upon Basil's ingenuous face. "Ask him, Master Basil."

"Will you not listen to me first? I want to speak to you about your mare."

"A quarter of an hour more or less won't bring her back, will it?" said old Corrie, with no touch of reproach in his voice. "Go and speak to your mate, and let me know what he says."

Basil departed and returned. It was as old Corrie supposed: Chaytor was not willing to admit Corrie into their partnership.

"He says you took a dislike to him from the first," said Basil.

"Almost my own words," said old Corrie, with a laugh. "He's a shrewd customer."

"——And that he is certain you and he would not agree. I would give a finger off each hand if it could have been, for a warmer-hearted and nobler man does not exist than Chaytor; and as for you, Corrie, I would wish nothing better. But I am bound to him by the strongest ties of gratitude."

"Say no more, Master Basil, say no more. Mayhap we shall meet by-and-by, and we shall be no worse friends because this has

fallen through. We have a lot to say to each other. I'm off the day after to morrow ; I should have been off before if it had not been for you and the little lady."

"She has been here?" cried Basil.

"She has been here four times since you left—the last time yesterday—not to see me, but you. She manages the thing herself, poor little lady, and comes alone, after giving the slip to those about her. Her first grief is over, though she will never forget the good father she has lost—never. It isn't in her nature to forget—bear that in mind, Master Basil. She clings to the friends that are left her. Friends, did I say? Why, she has only one—you, Master Basil ; I don't count. Besides, if I did it would matter little to her, for there's nothing more unlikely than that, after two days have gone by, I shall ever look upon her sweet face again. She goes one way, I go another."

"She goes one way?" repeated Basil ;
"will she not remain on the plantation?"

"She will not. You see, it isn't for her to choose ; she must do as she is directed. But we are mixing up things, and it will help them right well if I tell you what I've got to

tell straight on, commencing with A, ending with Z. Let us clear the ground, so that the axe may swing without being caught in loose branches. I'll hear what you've got to say. My mare is lost, I know."

"How do you know?"

"You would have brought it back with you if it hadn't been. Now then, lad, straight out, no beating about the bush; it's not in your line. I don't for a moment mistrust you. There's truth in your face always, Master Basil, and I wish with all my heart the little lady had you by her side to guide her instead of the skunk that's stepped into her dead father's shoes. You're a square man, and my mare is lost through no fault of yours, my lad."

Encouraged by these generous words, Basil told his story straight, and old Corrie listened with a pleasant face.

"The mare's gone," said old Corrie, when Basil had done, "and bad luck go with her. I know the brands on her: mayhap I shall come across her one of these fine days. Describe the rascals to me."

Basil did as well as he could, and said old Corrie was not treating him as he deserved.

“I am treating you as an honest gentleman,” said old Corrie, “as I know you to be. Jem the Hatter the villain’s called, is he? When a man once gets a nickname on the goldfields it sticks to him through thick and thin; if we meet he shall remember it. I give you a receipt in full, Master Basil.” And the good fellow held out his two hands, which Basil shook heartily. “I was sure something serious kept you away.” With Basil’s hand clasped firmly in his, he gazed steadily into the young man’s face. “It is an odd fancy I’ve got,” he said, “but it’s come across me two or three times while we’ve been talking. Is there any relationship between you and your new mate?”

“None.”

“Sure of that?”

“Sure.”

“And you met for the first time on Gum Flat?”

“For the first time.”

“Well, it is odd, and the more I look at you now the odder it becomes. You’ve let your hair grow since you went away.”

“Obliged to,” said Basil, laughing. “I had no razor. There are a couple I can

claim in Mr. Bidaud's house, as well as a brush or two ; but I daresay I shall not get them now that Mr. Gilbert Bidaud is in possession. What is your odd fancy, Corrie ? ”

“ Why, that you and your new mate would be as like each other as two peas, if you were dressed alike and trimmed your hair alike. Haven't you noticed it yourself ? ”

“ I've noticed that we resemble each other somewhat,” said Basil, “ but not to the extent you mention. I remember now he spoke of it himself, and that is one reason perhaps why he took a liking to me, and nursed me as he did. But I am terribly anxious to hear about the plantation and Annette. What is going to happen there that she is to leave it ? ”

“ In my own way, Master Basil,” said old Corrie, brushing his hand across his eyes to chase the fancy away, “ and to commence at the beginning. When you left me in the wood I was splitting slabs, a job I was doing for poor Mr. Anthony Bidaud. You doubted whether his brother would hold to it, as there was no written bond to show for it, and you were right. I went up to the house,

as I said I would, and saw Mr. Gilbert. You described him well, Master Basil; he's a man I would be sorry to trust. I told him of the contract between me and his brother. 'Where is it?' he asked. 'There was none written,' I answered; 'it was an order given as a dozen others have been, and of course you'll abide by it.' 'Of course I will not,' said he. 'Who are you that I should take your word? And you would fix your own price for the slabs? Clever, Mr. Corrie. Clever, Mr. Corrie!' I had told him my name. 'But I am a cleverer and a sharper.' A sharper he is in the right meaning of it, but he is not English, and didn't exactly know what he was calling himself. 'No, no,' he said, 'the moment a man's dead the vultures come. You are one. But I am equal to you. Burn your slabs.' 'You're a pretty specimen,' I said. 'Your brother was a gentleman; it doesn't run in the family.' He's a strange man, Master Basil, and if he ever loses his temper he takes care not to show it. More than what I've told you passed between us, and once he said quite coolly that if I could summon his brother as a witness he was willing to abide by his testi-

mony. The testimony of a dead man ! And to speak so lightly of one's flesh and blood ! I wouldn't trust such a man out of my sight."

"Did you see his sister ?" asked Basil.

"I did, but she said very little, and never spoke without looking at Mr. Gilbert for a cue. He gave it her always in a silent way that passed my comprehension, but they understand each other by signs."

"And Annette—did you see her ?"

"Yes, but at a distance. They kept her from me, I think, but I saw her looking at me quite mournfully, and I felt like going boldly up to her ; but second thoughts were best, and I kept away, only giving her to understand as well as I could without speaking that I was her friend, ready at any time to do her a service. 'Well,' said I to Mr. Gilbert, 'my compliments to you. Your throwing over the contract your brother made, won't hurt me a bit ; I could buy up a dozen like you'—which was brag, Master Basil, and he knew it was—'but I should be sorry to dishonour the dead as you are doing.' He took out a snuff-box, helped himself to a pinch, smiled, and said, 'Senti-

ment, Mr. Corrie, sentiment. I treat the dead as I treat the living. Rid me of you.' It was his foreign way of bidding me pack, but I told him I should take my time, that I had plenty of friends among his brother's workmen, and that I should go away very slowly. 'And let me give you a piece of advice,' I said. 'If you or any agent of yours comes spying near my hut I'll mark him so that he shall remember it.' 'Ah, ah,' he said, still smiling in my face, 'threats, eh?' 'Yes threats,' said I, 'and as many more of 'em as I choose to give tongue to.' 'Foolish Mr. Corrie, foolish Mr. Corrie,' he said, taking more snuff, 'to lose your temper. Let *me* give *you* a piece of advice. Think first, speak afterwards. It is a lesson—take it to heart. You are too impulsive, Mr. Corrie, like another person who also trespasses here, one who calls himself Basil.' 'Mr. Basil is a friend of mine,' I said, 'say one word against him, and I'll knock you down.' He was frightened, though he didn't show it, and he beckoned to a man, who came and stood by him. You know him, I daresay, Master Basil; his name is Rocke."

"He is my enemy, I am afraid," said Basil

“I found that out afterwards ; he has been spreading reports about you, either out of his own spite, or employed by cold-blooded Mr. Gilbert Bidaud. So Rocke came and stood by his side, but not too willingly. We’ve met before, Rocke and me, and he knows the strength of my muscle. I smiled at him, and he grinned at me, and I said, ‘We were speaking of Master Basil, and I was saying that if anyone said a word against him I was ready to knock him down. Perhaps you’d like to say something.’ ‘Not at all,’ said Rocke, and his grin changed to a scowl, ‘I know when it will pay me best to hold my tongue.’ Mr. Gilbert Bidaud shook with laughter. ‘Good Rocke,’ he said, ‘wise Rocke. We’ll make a judge of you. Anything more to say?’ This was to me, and I answered, almost as cool now as he was himself, ‘Only this. You spit upon a dead man’s bond, and you are a scoundrel. Don’t come near my hut, you or anyone that sides with you.’ Rocke understood this. ‘But,’ said I, ‘any friend of Master Basil’s is heartily welcome, and I’ll give them the best I have. So good day to you, Mr. Gilbert Bidaud.’ Then I went among the workmen and chatted

with them, and picked up scraps of information, and turned the current wherever I saw it was setting against you."

"My hearty thanks for the service, Corrie," said Basil.

"You're as heartily welcome. If one friend don't stick up for another behind his back we might as well be tigers. You see, Master Basil, you're a stranger here compared with me; I've been chumming with the men this many a year, and never had a word with one except Rocke, and even he has some sort of respect for me. Then you're a gentleman; I'm not. My lad, there are signs that can't be hidden; you've got the hall mark on you. Well, when I'd done as much as I could in a friendly way, I turned my back on the plantation, and came back here, and went on with my splitting, as if the contract still held good."

"Was not that a waste of time, Corrie?"

"I took my own view of it. There was the dead man soon to be in his grave; here was I with the blood running free through my veins. If he'd been alive he'd have kept his word; I was alive, and I'd keep mine. So I finished the contract out of respect for

Mr. Anthony Bidaud, and there the slabs are, stacked and ready. While I was at work my thoughts were on you ; four days passed, and you hadn't returned. I concluded that something had happened to you, but that you'd appear some time or another, and all I could do was to hope that you'd come back before I left the place. I had a great wish to see the little lady, but I didn't know how to compass it. Compassed it was, however, without my moving in it. Just a week it was after you'd gone that I was at work in the wood ; it was afternoon, a good many hours from sundown, when my laughing jackass began to laugh outrageous. When we're alone together he behaves soberly and decently, contented with quietly laughing and chuckling to himself, and it's only when something out of the way occurs that he gives himself airs. He's the vainest of the vain, Master Basil, and he does it to show off. His tantrums made me look round, and there, standing looking at me and the laughing jackass, without a morsel of fear of me or the bird, was the little lady."

"Annette?" cried Basil.

"The little lady herself," said old Corrie.

CHAPTER XV.

“WAS she alone?” asked Basil.

“Yes, quite alone. I dropped my axe, told the jackass to shut up—which it didn’t, Master Basil—and took the hand she held out to me. Such a little hand, Master Basil! I give you my word that as I held it in mine my thoughts went back, more years than I’d care to count, to the time when I was a little ’un myself, snuggling close up to my mother’s apron. I can’t remember when I’d thought of those days last. They were stowed away in a coffin, and dropped into a grave which stood between me as a boy and me as a man. It’s like having lived two lives, one of which was dead and buried. Now, all at once, the dead past came to life, and said, in a manner of speaking, ‘I belong to you,’ and it didn’t seem unnatural. The touch of the little lady’s hand was like a magic wand, and if she had said to me, ‘Let’s have a game of hopscotch,’ I believe I should have done it and

thought it the proper thing to do. But she said nothing of the sort, only looked at me with melancholy sweetness, and hoped I was not sorry to see her. Sorry! I was heartily and thankfully glad, and I told her so, and the tears came into her pretty eyes, and I said, without thinking at the moment that she'd lost a dear father, 'Don't cry, don't cry! there's nothing to cry for;' but I set myself right directly by saying, 'I mean, I hope it isn't me that makes you cry.' 'No,' she answered, 'it's only that you speak so kind.' My blood boiled up, for those words of hers showed me that since her father's death she had not been treated with kindness, and if she hadn't been a little lady, rich in her own right, I should have offered to run off with her there and then. But under any circumstances that would have been a dangerous thing to do, for her and me; it would have brought her uncle down upon me, and he'd have had the law on his side. So instead of offering to do a thing so foolish I said, 'Did you come on purpose to see me?' 'Yes,' she answered, 'on purpose. I gave them the slip, and they don't know where I am.' 'Don't you be afraid then, my

little maid,' I said, 'they won't find you here, because they won't venture within half a mile of me. You've done no harm in coming to see a friend, as you may be sure I am. Can I do anything for you?' 'Yes,' she said; 'you like Basil, don't you?' Upon that I said I was as true a friend of yours as I was of hers. 'Will you tell me, please,' she said then, 'why he has gone quite away without trying to see me? I know it wouldn't be easy, because my uncle and aunt are against him; but I thought he would have tried. I have been to every one of his favourite places, in the hope of meeting him, and my uncle has said such hard things of him that my heart is fit to break.' Poor little lady! She could hardly speak for her tears. Well, now, that laughing jackass was making such a chatter, and behaving so outrageous, pretending to sob, which made her sob the more, that I proposed to take her to my hut here, where we could talk quietly. She put her little hand in mine and walked along with me to my hut, and the minute we came in the magpie cried out, 'Little lady, little lady.' She looked up at this, and I told her it was a magpie I was training for her. It gave her

greater pleasure than such a little thing as that ought to have done, and though she did not say it in so many words I saw in her face the grateful thought that she still had friends in the world that had grown so sad and lonely. Then I told her all about your last meeting with me—how tenderly you had spoken of her, what love you had for her, and how I had lent you my mare to take you to a place where you hoped to find a doctor and a lawyer who might be able to serve her in some way. The news comforted her, but she was greatly distressed by the fear that you had met with an accident which prevented your return. I wouldn't listen to this for the little maid's sake, and said I was positive you would soon be back, and that nothing was farther from your mind than the idea of going away entirely without seeing her again. 'He will have to make haste,' said the little lady, with a world of thought in her face, 'or he will never be able to find me.' I asked why, and she answered that she believed, when everything was settled, that her uncle would sell the plantation and take her away to Europe. 'Can't it be prevented?' she asked, and I said I was afraid it

could not ; that her uncle stood now in the place of her father, and could do as he liked. ‘If you are compelled to go,’ I said, ‘you shall take the magpie away with you to remind you of the old place—that is, if you will be allowed to keep it.’ ‘I shall be,’ she said ; and now, child as she was, I noticed in her signs of a resolute will I hadn’t given her credit for. ‘If you give it to me, it will be mine, and they shall not take it from me. I will fight for it, indeed, I will.’ I was pleased to hear her speak like that ; it showed that she had spirit which would be of use to her when she was a woman grown. She stopped with me as long as she dared, and before she went away she said she would come again, and asked me if I thought I could teach the bird to speak your name. ‘It would be easy enough,’ I answered, and that is how it comes about that the magpie—which for cleverness and common-sense, Master Basil, I would match against the cunningest bird that ever was hatched—can call out ‘Basil—Basil,’ as clearly as you pronounce your own name. It was at that meeting, and at every meeting afterwards she gave me a message to you if you returned. You were to be sure

not to go away again without seeing her ; if you couldn't contrive it, she would ; that proved her spirit again ; and that if it should unfortunately happen that you returned after she was taken away you were never to forget that Annette loved you, and would love you all her life, whatever part of the world she might be in. Those are her words as near as I can remember them, and they're easy enough for you to understand, but it isn't so easy to make you understand the voice in which she spoke them. I declare, Master Basil, it runs through me now, broken by little sobs, with her pretty hands clasping and unclasping themselves, and her tender body shaking like a reed."

"Dear little Annette," said Basil, and his eyes, too, were tearful, and his voice broken a little ; "dear little Annette."

"She's worth a man's thoughts, Master Basil," said old Corrie, "and a man's pity, and will be better worth em' when she's a woman grown. You're a fortunate man, child as she is, to have won a love like the little lady's, for if I'm a judge of human nature, and I believe myself to be—which isn't exactly conceit on my part, mind you—

it's love that will last and never be forgotten. It's no light thing, Master Basil, love like that; when it comes to a man he'll hold on to it if he's got a grain of sense in him."

"You cannot say one word in praise of Annette," said Basil, "that I'm not ready to cap with a dozen. I believe, with you, that she has a soul of constancy, and I hold her in my heart as I would a beloved sister. If I could only help and advise her! But how can I do that when she is to be taken away to a distant land?"

"There's no telling what may happen in the future," said old Corrie. "What to-day seems impossible to-morrow comes to pass. To beat one's head against a stone wall because things aren't as we wish them to be is the height of foolishness, but it's my opinion that going on steadily doing one's duty, working manfully and doing what's right and square, is the best and surest way to open out the road we'd like to tread. Your new mate, Mr. Chaytor, hasn't disturbed us, and I must do him the justice to say that he shows sense and discretion."

"He is one in a thousand," said Basil, "and it is impossible for me to express to

you how sorry I am that you have not taken kindly to each other."

"It does happen sometimes, but not often, that men are mistaken in their likings and dislikings, but we'll not argue the point. Now I've got to tell you how things stand at the plantation. There was an inquest on the body of Mr. Anthony Bidaud, doctors and lawyers being called in by Mr. Gilbert, and the verdict was that he died of natural causes. There being no will Mr. Gilbert took legal possession, as guardian to his niece under age. He decides that it will not be good for her to remain where she is; but must be educated as a lady, and brought up as one. That, says Mr. Gilbert, can't be done on the plantation; it must be done in a civilised country. Consequently the plantation must be sold. With lawyers paid to push things on, three month's work had been done in three weeks. A purchaser has been found, deeds drawn up, money paid, and next Monday they're off, Mr. Gilbert Bidaud, his sister, name unknown, and the little lady."

"Hot haste, indeed," said Basil.

"To which neither you nor I can have anything to say legally."

“It is so, unhappily. And then to Europe?”

“And then to Europe. I am telling you what the little lady tells me. I can’t go beyond that.”

“Of course not. But does she not know to what part of Europe?”

“She knows nothing more. He keeps his mouth shut; you can’t compel him to open it. There are cases, Master Basil, in which honesty is no match for roguery; this is one. Mr. Gilbert Bidaud has the law on his side, and can laugh openly at you. Now, the little lady was here yesterday. ‘No news of Basil?’ she asked. ‘No news of Basil,’ I said. ‘Is he dead do you think?’ she whispered, with a face like snow. ‘No,’ I said stoutly; ‘don’t you go on imagining things of that sort. He’s alive, and will give a satisfactory account of himself when he comes back.’ I spoke confidently to keep up her heart, though I had misgivings of you. ‘I shall be here to-morrow,’ she said, ‘and every day till we leave the plantation.’ She has contrived cleverly, hasn’t she, to slip them as she does?”

“Then I shall see her soon!” said Basil, eagerly.

“ In less than an hour, if she comes at her usual time. Our confab is over. You had best go and seek your mate. I’ll make my apologies to him, if he needs ’em, for keeping you so long.”

If Basil had known, he had not far to go to find Newman Chaytor, for that worthy was quite close to him. Being of an inquiring mind Chaytor had resolved to hear all that passed between Basil and old Corrie, and had found a secure hiding-place in the rear, and well within earshot, of the two friends. He stored it all up, being blessed with an exceptionally retentive memory. Old Corrie went one way, and Basil went another, and Chaytor emerged from his hiding-place. “ I am quite curious about little Annette,” he said to himself, as he followed Basil at a safe distance. “ Quite a sentimental little body—and an heiress, too! Well, we shall see. Say that my friend Basil’s future is a nut—I’ll crack it; I may find a sweet kernel inside.”

He came up to Basil, and greeted him with a frank smile. “ We’ve been talking about the plantation,” said Basil, “ and poor Anthony Bidaud’s daughter, Annette. She

is coming this afternoon to see me. I'll tell you everything by-and-by."

"I don't want to intrude upon your private affairs, Basil," said Chaytor.

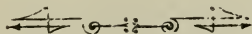
"You have a right to know," said Basil. "I have no secrets from you, Chaytor."

Then they talked of other matters, Chaytor with animation, Basil with a mind occupied by thoughts of Annette. "I see," said Chaytor, patting Basil's shoulder with false kindness, "that you are thinking of the little maid. Now, I'm not going to play the churl. Don't mind me for the rest of the day."

"You're a good fellow," said Basil, as Chaytor walked away; but he did not walk far. Unobserved by Basil, he kept secret watch upon him, determined to see Annette, determined to hear what she and Basil had to say to each other. As old Corrie had said, "there are cases in which honesty is no match for roguery." Basil posted himself in such a position that he could see any person who came towards the wood from Bidaud's plantation. He heard the thud of old Corrie's axe in the forest; the honest woodman could have remained idle had he chosen, but he was unhappy unless he was at work and though

he desired no profit from it he felled and split trees for the pleasure of the thing. Now and again there came to Basil's ears the piping and chattering of gorgeous-coloured birds as they fluttered hither and thither, busy on their own concerns, love-making, nest-mending, and the like; in their commonwealth many torches of human passion and sentiment found a reflex. Vanity was there, jealousy was there, hectoring and bullying of the weak were there, and much sly pilfering went on; entertainments, too, were being given, for at some distance from the three men in the woods, one swinging his axe with a will and wiping his cheerful brows, another with his heart in his eyes watching for a little figure in the distance, and the third, stirred by none but evil thoughts, watching with cunning eyes the watcher—at some distance from these two honest men and one rogue were assembled some couple of dozen feathered songsters in green and yellow coats. They perched upon convenient boughs and branches, forming a circle, with invisible music books before them, and at a given signal from their leader they began to pipe their songs without words, and filled space with melody. Their music may

be likened to the faintly sweet echoes of skilled bell-ringers, each tiny bird the master of a note which was never piped unless in harmony. It was while these fairy bells were pealing their sweetest chord that Basil saw Annette approaching. He ran towards her eagerly, and called her name ; and she with a sudden flush in her face and with her heart palpitating with joy, cried, "Basil ! Basil !" and fell into his arms.



CHAPTER XVI.

HE led her to a secluded spot, followed secretly by fox Chaytor. They passed close to where old Corrie was working, and he, hearing footsteps — be sure, however, that Chaytor's were noiseless—laid down his axe, and went towards them.

“He has come — he has come!” cried Annette.

“What did I tell you?” said old Corrie. “All you've got to do in this world, little lady, is to have patience.”

She was so overjoyed, having tight hold of Basil's hand, that she would have accepted the wildest theories without question.

“Mr. Corrie,” she said, “may I have the magpie to-day?”

“Surely,” he replied, “it is quite ready for you, and you will be able to teach it anything you please. But why so soon? Aren't you coming again?”

Her face became sad, and she clutched Basil's fingers convulsively: "I am afraid not; this is the last, last time! I have heard something, Mr. Corrie, and if it is true my uncle and aunt are going to take me away to-morrow morning."

"In that case," said old Corrie, "I will have the bird ready for you. Now you and Master Basil can talk; I'll not interrupt you." He went away at once, and left them together. For a little while they had nothing of a coherent nature to say to each other; but then Basil, recognising the necessity of introducing some kind of system into their conversation, related to Annette all that had happened within his knowledge since the sad morning of her father's death, and heard from her lips all that she had to relate. Much of it he had already heard from old Corrie. The refrain she harped upon was, "And must we, must we part, Basil? And shall we never, never see each other again?"

"Part we must, dear Annette," he said; "I have no control over you, and no authority that can in any way be established. When I first came to the plantation I was a stranger

to you and your father, and the law would acknowledge me as no better now."

"Next to my dear father and mother," said Annette, "I love you best in all the world. They cannot take that away from me; what I feel is my own, my very own. Oh, Basil, I sometimes have wicked thoughts, and feel myself turning bad; I never felt so before my uncle came."

"Annette, listen to me. You must struggle against these thoughts, and must say to yourself, 'They will make my dear father and mother sorrowful. They have shown me kindness and love, and I will show the same to them.' You cannot see them, Annette, but their spirits are watching over you; and there is a just and merciful God in heaven who is watching over you, too, and whom you must not offend."

"I will do as you say, Basil, dear; I will never, never forget your words. They will keep me good."

"Let them keep you brave as well, my dear. I promise to remember you always, to love you always, and perhaps when you are a woman—it will not be so long, Annette—we shall meet again."

“ Oh, Basil, that will be true happiness.”

“ Time flies quickly, Annette. It seems but yesterday since I was a boy myself, and when I look back and think of my own dear parents, I am happy in the belief that I never did anything to cause them sorrow.”

“ You could not, Basil.”

“ Ah, my dear, I don't know that ; but I had a good mother, and so had you, and my father and yours were both noble men. They are not with us, and that makes the duty we owe them all the stronger. To do what is right because we feel that it is right to do it, not because it is done in the sight of others—that is what makes us good, Annette. My mother taught me that lesson as she lay on her deathbed, and it has brought me great happiness ; it has supported me in adversity. You must not mind my speaking so seriously, Annette——”

“ I love to hear you, Basil. I will be like you, indeed I will.”

“ Much better, I hope. You see, my dear, this is the last time we shall be together for a long time ; but not so long after all, if we look at it in the right light, and I should like you to remember me as you would remember

a brother, who, being older than you, is perhaps a little wiser."

"I will, Basil. All my wicked thoughts are gone; they shall never come again; but I shall still feel a little unhappy sometimes."

"Of course you will, dear, and so shall I. But faith in God's goodness and the performance of our duty will always lighten that unhappiness. The stars of heaven are not brighter than the stars of hope and love we can keep shining in our hearts."

"Kiss me, Basil; that is the seal. I shall go away happier now."

"Tell me, Annette. Are your uncle and aunt kind to you?"

"They are neither kind nor unkind. They talk a great deal to each other, but very seldom to me, unless it is to order me to do something. Aunt says, 'Go to bed,' and I go to bed; 'It is time to get up,' and I get up; 'Come to dinner,' and I come to dinner. It is all like that; they never speak to me as my father and mother did, and they have never kissed me."

"You must be obedient to them, Annette."

"I will be, Basil."

“They are your guardians, and a great deal depends upon them.”

“Yes, I know that ; but I don’t think they like me, and, Basil, I don’t think uncle is a good man.”

“It will be better,” said Basil gravely, “not to fancy that. It may be only that he is a little different from other men, and that you are not accustomed to his ways.”

“I will try,” said Annette piteously, “to obey you in everything, but I can’t help my thoughts, and I can’t help seeing and hearing. He speaks in a hard voice to everybody ; he is unkind to animals ; he has never put a flower on my dear father’s grave.”

“There, there, Annette—don’t cry. I only want you to make the best, and not the worst, of things.”

“I will, Basil—indeed, indeed I will. When I am far away from you, you *will* think, will you not, that I am trying hard to do everything to please you ? ”

“I promise to think so, and I have every faith in you. It is all for your good, you know, Annette. When you are out of this country where are your aunt and uncle going to live.”

“ In Europe.”

“ But in what part of Europe ? ”

“ I don't know. All that uncle and aunt say is, ‘ We are going to Europe.’ ‘ But in what country ? ’ I asked. ‘ Don't be inquisitive,’ they answered ; ‘ we are going to Europe ; ’ and they will say nothing more. I am sometimes afraid to speak when they are near me.”

“ Poor little Annette ! Now attend to me, dear. Wherever you are you can write to me.”

“ Yes, Basil, yes. And may I ? Oh, how good you are ! Oh, if ever I should get a letter from you ! It will be the next best thing to having you with me.”

“ Remember what I am saying, Annette. I want you to write to me, wherever you are, and I want to answer your letters. This is the way it can be done. When you are settled write me your first letter—I shall not mind how long it is——”

“ It shall be a long, long one, Basil.”

“ And address it to ‘ Mr. Basil Whittingham, Post-office, Sydney, New South Wales.’ I shall be sure to get it. Now for my answer. If you are happy in your uncle's house, and

tell me so, I will send my answer there ; but if you think it will be best for me not to send it to his house, I will address it to the post-office in whatever town or city you may be living. Some friend in the new country (you are sure to make friends, my dear) will tell you how you may get my letters. This looks a little like deceit, but it will be pardonable deceit if you are unhappy—not otherwise. Do you understand ? ”

“ Perfectly, Basil. I shall have something to think of now ; you have given me something to do. And will you ever come to me ? ”

“ It is my hope ; I intend to work hard here to get money, and if I am fortunate, in a few years when you are a beautiful woman——”

“ I would like to be, Basil, for your sake.”

“ I will come to wherever you may be.”

“ I do not wish for anything more, Basil. I shall pray night and morning for your good fortune. How happy you have made me—how happy—how happy ! I shall keep the stars of love and hope shining in my heart—for you. How beautifully the bell-birds are singing. I shall hear them when I am thou-

sands of miles away. But, Basil, you will want something to remember me by."

"No, dear Annette, I need nothing to remind me of you."

"You do, Basil, and I have brought it for you. Look, Basil, my locket——"

"But Annette——"

"Have I said 'No' to anything you have told me—and will you say 'No' to this little thing? I think it will not be right if you do, so, dear Brother Basil, you must not refuse me. I wish I had something better to give you, but you will be satisfied with this, will you not? I have worn it always round my neck, since I was a little, little girl, and you must wear it round yours. Promise me."

"I promise, dear, if you will not be denied."

"I will not, indeed I will not—and your promise is made. See, Basil, here it lies open in my hand; take it. The picture is a portrait of my dear mother; father had it painted for me by a gentleman who came once to the plantation. Then when you come to me in the country across the sea, you will show it to me and tell me that you have worn it always and always, because you love me, and because I love you."

“ I have nothing to give you, Annette. I am very, very poor.”

“ You have given me a star of hope, Basil. How sorry I am that you are poor ! But my nurse, who has been sent away——”

“ Have they done that, Annette ? ”

“ Yes, and she cried so at leaving me. She told me that one day I should be very, very rich. So what does it matter if you are poor ? Let me fasten it round your neck. Now you have me and my dear mother next your heart.”

He took the innocent child in his arms, and she lay nestling there a few moments with bright thoughts of the happy future in her mind. Suddenly a loud “ Coo-ey ” was heard and the sound of hurried footsteps. It was old Corrie’s voice that gave the alarm. It was intended as such, for when Basil started to his feet and stood with his arm round Annette, holding her close to him, he looked up, and saw Gilbert Bidaud standing before him.

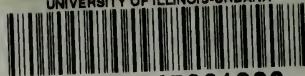
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